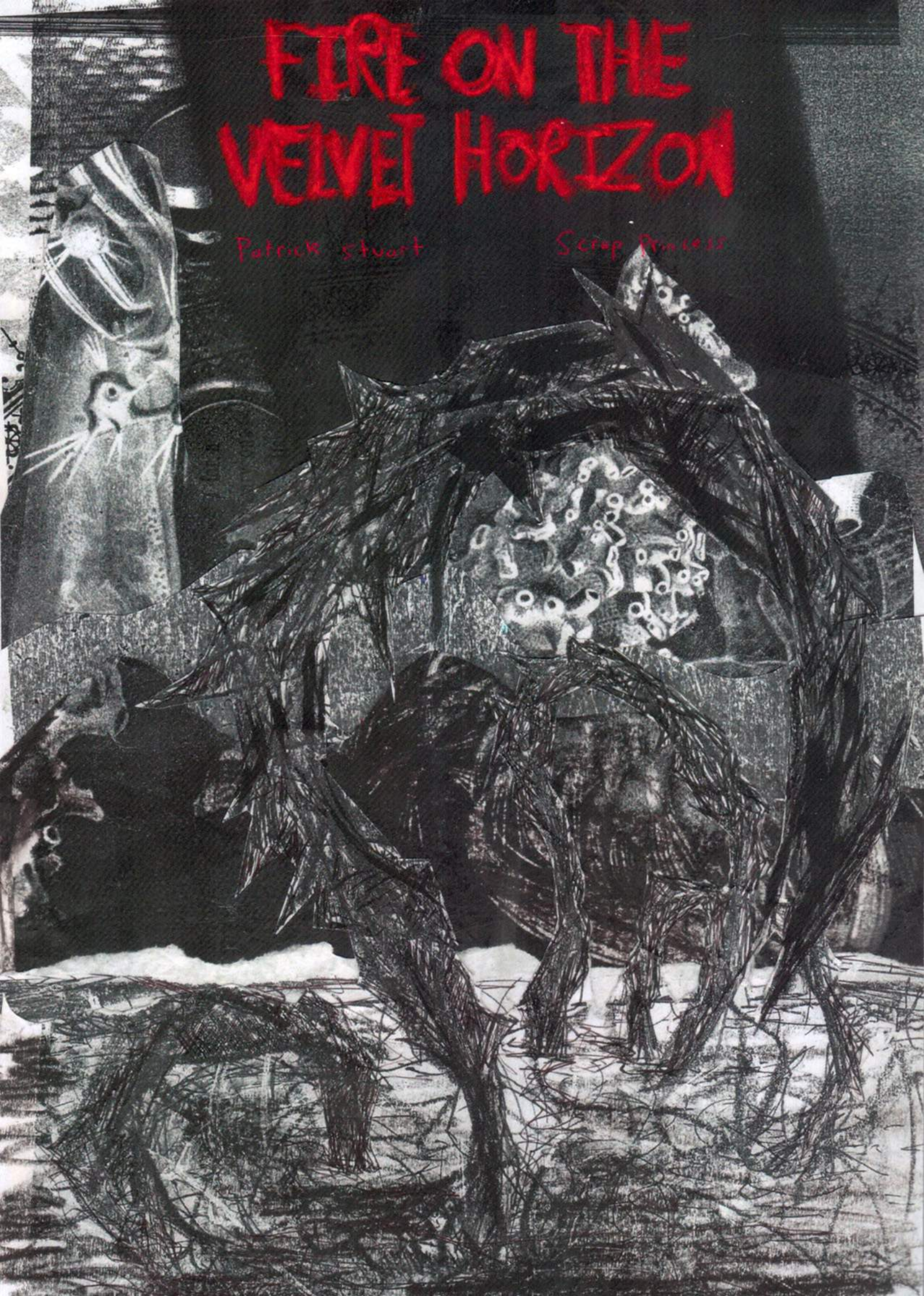


FIRE ON THE VELVET HORIZON

Patrick Stuart

Scrap Princess



FIRE ON THE VELVET HORIZON

Written by Patrick Stuart
Drawings by Scrap Princess

Some pages proof read by
Zach Marx Weber
and
Radek Drozdalski

But not all. We did some also, and we are difficult, difficult people to proof read for.
So any failures in the final results here should reflect only on us, not them.

Scrap Princess dedicates this great work to **TIAMAT** and would like to thank prescription
medication

Patrick Stuart would like to dedicate it to his parents.
But also kind of hopes they never read it since he is not sure what they will make of it.



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Who writes the Monster Manual?

I mean exactly who? Anyone who has read a D&D monster manual (especially some of the early ones) will be familiar with an assumed point of view that is best described as omnipotent-dementia. The writer of the D&D manual sometimes seems like a scholar reading from a range of sources and describing a creature in the manner of a medieval bestiary, sometimes they appear to possess the knowledge of god, someone observing an entire world from outside the flow of space and time telling you, for instance, what a Groll is likely to have in their pockets or on their mind, sometimes disclosing the secret origin of a forgotten deity, or the nature of reality itself in an idle aside, yet in the same breath they will point out a mystery, the answer to which 'no-one knows'.

Not only that, but the same voice will often cite 'Sages', apparently academic sources from inside the described world, describing what they do or do not know, or disclosing what they suppose to be the case.

Added to this, in many Monster Manuals are fragments of what are supposed to be first person and third person recollections of actual events.

This imagined point of view makes perfect sense when creating a monster manual, it gives players and DM's exactly the right balance of hard information, soft suggestion, inspiring possibility and potential mystery that they need to create a monster in their own mind and use it in the game. It makes sense in no other place or time.

I have taken to calling this unique fictional voice 'M'th Person'. (As in 1st Person or 3rd Person.) So if you want to be really fucking pretentious, if someone asks you what you are reading, you can say "A new form of experimental fiction written in M'th person, the point of view Barthes described as 'Inconsistent Omnipotence' or that Robert McKee called 'The Unreliable God Voice'", and you will be almost telling the truth. (Apart from the bits about Barthes and McKee, I just made those up.)

There was a long description here of the events leading to the creation of the book but I condensed it into this thrilling one-act drama.

SP - God this is dragging on. Promise me when this is done we can do a simple easy monster book where I draw the monsters and you write them.

PS - Sure. Hey, you have drawn some monsters.

SP - Just pick the ones you like.

PS - Let's do exactly 100!

SP - It is now 6 months later.

Over time what was intended to be simply a list of animals generated its own cast of sages, with their own careers, life paths and stories, and its own geography, it created around itself a suggested world, from the black towers of Jukai, up the golden Or, through the Melanic Moors and the Pyrrhous Plains, with hints of its own history. As well as a strange obsession with colour.

Almost all of the colour is in the words and it bleeds through onto the page in the monsters or in a halo around the monsters. So they are bright things in a very dark, rich world.

I will let Scrap talk about the art because I suspect she will do it better but I would encourage you to look not just at the monsters or the rich treacly strange backgrounds that

are like blurred windows into another world but at the combination between the two and the relationship between them over the whole of the work.

Writing is easier to write about than art, or seems to be so for most people because it is made of words and we assume that the blocks of its being can be converted easily enough into the blocks of its analysis. So people will probably talk about my contribution more than they should, and pay less attention to Scrap than they should.

I hope this makes you feel a little like you felt when you opened a Monster Manual for the first time and saw arranged in neat block, a world of strange encounters and a compilation of living things, each carrying its own fragmentary history, a little like a story and a little like a tool lying in a box, with its handle arranged towards to, asking to be picked up and used in some work of your own.

For an OSR book there is a sad lack of tables, therefore let me both remedy that now, and also address any worries and critical queries you may have about the writing style.

WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON WITH THIS SENTENCE (roll a d6)

1. It is a brilliant piece of grammar-twisting experimental writing that you simply fail to comprehend. (roll again on sub-table A)
2. Successive arguments over the use of commas and the exact arrangement of words have led to an uneasy truce and a no-mans land of both punctuation and meaning.
3. The proofreaders missed this bit.
4. The proofreaders caught this bit but the writer carefully undid all their alterations (roll a d3)
 1. For deep artistic reasons (roll again on sub-table A)
 2. Out of rage and spite
 3. He can't really remember why
5. The proofreaders caught this bit but probably shouldn't have.
6. No-one really knew what they were doing.

(Sub table A)

DEEP ARTISTIC REASONS YOU FAIL TO COMPREHEND (Roll a d6)

1. The rhythm of the sentence lends a deeper structure that punctuation would not (THE STRUCTURE OF SOUND, OF ORAL TRANSMISSION, OF HOMER AND SHAKESPEARE YOU IGNORANT GRAMMAR-OBSESSED FUCKING COMPUTER PROGRAMMERS!)
2. The sentence was better with an apparently-inconsistent mish-mash of words which produce a powerful poetic effect when combined rapidly in the mind (AN EFFECT MUCH GREATER THAN YOUR MERE 'REASON' COULD EVER COMPREHEND!)
3. It is clarified by the context in which it is placed. (A WORK OF ART MUST BE CONSIDERED AS A WHOLE YOU DISGUSTING SURGEONS OF THOUGHT, THERE ARE NO DIVISIONS IN NATURE BUT ONLY AN ENDLESS FLOW OF ONE THING INTO ANOTHER!)
4. It is an impish provocation or grammatical flight-of-fancy, indulged in for the pure joy of it, in the same manner that a happy boy would skip down the street. (A JOY YOU WOULD NO DOUBT STRANGLE FROM THE WORLD WITH YOU 'STYLE GUIDES' AND ENDLESS WHINING YOU MEEK DRONES!)
5. The word-progression, taken as a whole, creates an impetus of moral, aesthetic or imaginative force which piles into the next sentence in an onrushing flow of words. (YOU FUCKING GOT THE GIST OF IT ANYWAY DIDN'T YOU?)
6. See result six on the previous table.

Patrick Stuart



SHIT ON THE MOON!

SO Patrick has explained the premise already, with me drawing and him responding, the reverse of how it had been on previous projects.

The art I send to him was not carefully chosen at all. Instead a vast improvised-cannon-ammunition of developed drawings, marginalia, scrawls, doodles and languishing mistakes. Like a pig bucket of stolen meals and kitchen leavings. I ~~used to have~~ ^{One of those} it served new well!

Normally if you are going to have art that is yours in a thing people will see you'll want it be your "best". I put best in quote marks because I have been constantly surprised by what drawings people like and what they don't. So who am I to judge if everyone is pleased by the sight of Vague Toad Thing With Hat Suggestion over The Goat With The Best Expression? It's all just the universe screaming at itself right?

I have a weird relationship with my art anyway, it feels like something I am only partially responsible so hey, so who am I to be the final veto?

As I soon learned the most irrelevant marks on paper could be the ones Patrick was most inspired by (sometimes sending me on a desperate search to make sure I still had that bit of paper, and hadn't thrown it away in utter misplaced confidence of its unusability) ^{I AM A STAR OF PACKAGED GORE} And sometimes a drawing I felt was particularly strong was mutually felt but I would hate what he wrote about it. OR he would write about the thing in the fucking edge of the page.

The Hadean, ^{Salsnail} and the Poyazuka have some of the biggest gap between how significant I felt the original sketch was (i.e very little) and the thing that grew out of it via ~~my~~ Patrick's psychic uterus allegory. Relatedly those were some of the monsters I did an additional drawing for, as I felt the sketch didn't do the idea enough justice (though the original is lurking in the background).

In other places where I couldn't tolerate the sketch I reworked it a little. Sometimes a couple of times I changed it back or included the original as well on Patrick's suggestion.

Which seemed fair enough considering there were a few monsters rejected by me and frequented rewrites done.

^{whose} ^{closed market} The monster ~~which~~ ^{texts} ~~marketed~~ my vague conception of it (on the rare event that a conception exists before the monster) is probably the Stumble Weed. So a bladey stick thing on legs. It ~~was~~ ^{more} interesting.

The sketches that particular brilliant in my eyes are those of the Flammeous lads, Lunaraptor, and the Bedlam Birds.

^{Most pictures contain my hair somewhere} The Stegloswan, Pinhound and the Meremaid are drawings that I now love because of the writing. Oh and the Perspective Hound, and the..yeah I could probably keep rattling off favourites and delights but let's (me at you) talk about the background:

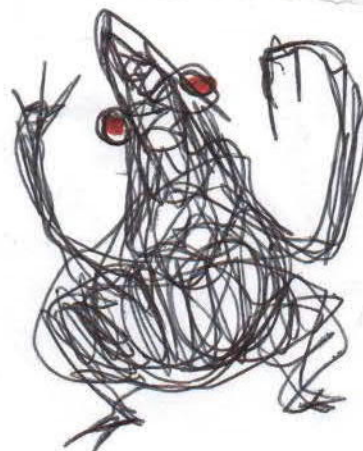
I tried using page formatting software, got frustrated, and decided to do it all by hand and made use of whatever looked fun to jam into the photocopier.

As the project went on I got more ambitious and then had to redo earlier ones because they now looked boring. Sometimes the longest bit of page layout was searching my house for something that would have just the right texture for the personality of the beast. Then I would cover it with text and it would be barely visible anyway. Such is life at the bosom of Tiamat.

Originally it was gonna have some generic stats (like blood thirst and orneyness and raw cunnings) but it was obvious this flimsy token pretence of "convenience" and "usability" was a waste of time, because anyone who could use a monster that had its own dog dimension or made all civic laws inviolate in a game would be capable of deciding if it should have 4 or 5 hitdice or not. ^{Also contemplation of commas and semi-colons} ~~DON'T GIVE ANYTHING~~ ^{CLAW/CLAW/DIE} ^{BECAUSE THAT IS BULLSHIT}

Some of the monsters even have space where you can write your own stats! Otherwise post it notes. ^{WHITE OUT IS GOOD TOO} ^{THANK}

Yours Sullenly
SCRAP PRINCESS



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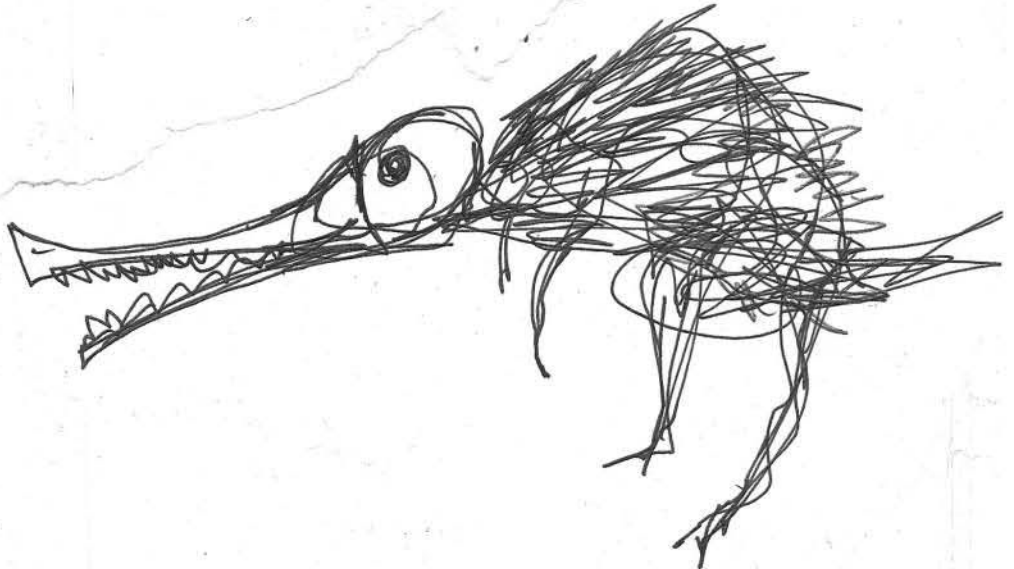
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(Ŧ is the capital version of ʌ.
It is pronounced like a
rattling hiss with the back of
the throat.)



ABHORRERS

They are, above all, creatures of law. Of form and process. They will never break a rule and until they do they are beyond the reach of either blade or wrath.

Anyone approaching one can clearly see it is a slug. A huge and monstrous slug, nine feet high, with a sharklike triangle mouth, intelligent black eyes and rows of flaccid arms hanging from its sides. (They do not like interacting with the world except to destroy.) Each has a kind of darkly coloured sheath around the head and body top with five pulsating organs on each side. Like lipless circular mouths, always threatening to disgorge something. As you approach, the urge to kill it rises in your throat like broaching spew. Your fingers twitch with the desire to do it harm, to pierce its monstrous body with a blade, to crush it with a weight, to slice its grinning face, anything at all to let it no more be, to burn the wound of it from the world.

But your fingers loose from your hilt, your fist refuses to clench, you reach out, smiling, to shake it by the hand.

Nothing disordered the Abhorrer can stand. It is a pool of order in the world. Nothing illegal can happen around it, nothing impolite. No one can be hurt or struck or harmed.

People can be hanged. Or whipped. Or otherwise destroyed. But only if it is within the law.

Simply to be in the presence of an Abhorrer is to be bound by social law. The assumptions of politeness take on the raw enforcement of physics. A greeting must be returned, an invitation exchanged a complement dealt. This is no mysterious influence to be shaken off or dispelled. It is the true nature of reality wherever the Abhorrer is.

Everyone near an Abhorrer hates it and wants to destroy it and this they can never do, except by legal process. And Abhorrrers are very very good lawyers. They know all the laws. All of them.

And the Abhorrrers hate. Everything. They hate everything. Every race. Every culture. Not with the distant poetic loathing of remorseless gods, they hate in a particular way. They hate your clothes, they hate your smell, they hate the way you stand and the colour of your skin and your shoes and your jokes. They hate you. They hate everyone but right now, at this particular moment, they hate you.

They are incredibly intelligent and well-read. They love art. They love to seek out the best art and arrange it in the finest collections. Then safely and legally burn them to the ground. They like to watch.

If slavery is legal they like to buy the strongest and most beautiful people, and chain them in rows. And safely and legally, burn them alive.

As the Abhorrrers see the world there are only beings like them, beings who are lying about being like them or beings too stupid to be like them. They genuinely do not comprehend that all other races and cultures do not regard each other with secret and eternal hate. They will assume that any claims to the contrary are clever lies and politely pretend to agree.

They love the petty wrongs, elisions, small flaws, mild lies and worming resentments that make up a part daily life, treating them with complicit amusement and secret joy. If they see this behaviour in you this way they will mark their notice with some look or turn of phrase that indicates that you have been accepted into a clever clique.

They are dangerous and difficult to encounter in the wilds, but the true threat they pose is to a civilised land. In a city, they are a nightmare of law, a daemon of civilisation.

The longer an Abhorrer stays within a city the more powerful it becomes. It arrives as a wealthy dealer in slaves or sugar. Everyone despises it and wishes to destroy it. Of course to begin with various priests and heroes make serious efforts to get rid of it. They are unable to do so. In fact they are scrupulously polite to it. Gradually, over time, the elite of the city tire of dreaming of destroying the Abhorrer. Slowly, horribly, they get used to it. They must tolerate it anyway and inwardly they slowly surrender to its influence.

And the Abhorrer is very useful. It is a legal expert, an accomplished creature of business and very socially connected. The Abhorrer can do very well indeed. It can become a lawyer, a council member, perhaps even the leader of the city itself.

All the time, in every way it can, through every legal means and with every effort it expends, the Abhorrer is trying to corrupt and destroy everyone and everything around it. It wants to see them morally and spiritually ruined, and then physically destroyed. Legally. Decently.

It will trick families into debt, it will support the expansion of slavery, it will gleefully enforce the cruellest laws, it will destabilise the economy, it will encourage factionalism and resentment and pointless feuds.

Abhorrrers have been beaten in two ways, the path of Chaos and the path of Crime.

The chaotic path needs revolution, invasion, destruction, inversion or a total overruling of the law. The social compact must be utterly dissolved. In a state of revolution when the normal laws are being cast down, or invasion, when an old law is suppressed and lost, or simply utter chaos, then Abhorrrers can be fought. With no defining structure to embody and infest, they are made vulnerable and can be physically attacked. Of course the side effects of such a path can be severe, many innocents will die, and the creature must be killed in the chaos between social worlds, as a new order emerges from the mess the Abhorrer will infest it once again. The City Patriarch becomes the Peoples Commandant.

The other path, the cunning path, is the path of Noble Crime. The Abhorrer must obey the law, that is what it is, it is simply incapable of doing otherwise. But laws can be perverted, judges bribed, juries bought, facts can be fabricated, evidence invented and witnesses deluded from the truth. To use this path involves becoming minor lords of crime. Those who engage in it must risk all and dare everything, placing themselves in danger not only from common groups of organised crime (often more well-connected to authority than they would wish to admit) but also, by breaking a plethora of laws they make themselves subject to arrest if anything comes out.

A conspiracy must be constructed, a network of events that implicates the Abhorrer in some treasonous and utterly extra-legal crime, something so vile and extreme that the most total sanction must be sought. This conspiracy must be iron-clad, provable and utterly made-up. A mad concoction of facts, yet testable in court. Abhorrrers cannot break the law, if they are subpoenaed, they will attend, if they are formally arrested they will quietly come, if they are tried and convicted in a court of law, they must accept the verdict. They will die passively. Screaming, placing their own heads upon the block, calling out that they have been framed, set up and sent down. It is the truth. But nobody will care.

Everybody hates Abhorrrers, and anyway, the verdict was fair.



AESKITHETES

(Ay-Skith-ee-ts)

The Aeskithetes are a civilised and reasonable people, focused here from an incomprehensible world where life and heat beat up from the earth in regular time and death rains from a cold sky where impossible gods move.

Their curling, vertically-oriented bodies look like thick translucent smoke, or running wax from multiple candles, fouled and merging together as one. The torsos curve like question marks, only a few feet of frictive tail pressing into the earth. The Aeskithetes are unnaturally strong, they can easily retain this stance, despite its apparent balance and poise. Their substance is fluxal, tough and dense, much more than normal flesh.

Slim whiplike tentacles undulate oddly and poke out from their body at mad angles. The Aeskithetes control these cords through concentration, they serve as arms and grappling hands. The average Aeskithete can regularly calm the two tentacles just below its head, these will still, grasp, gesture and emphasise remarks in mimicry of of mankind, while the rest of the tentacles writhe. If an Aeskithete becomes distracted or upset, all of its tentacles bug out and madly wave their own response. Through inner harmony, or force of will, one may arrange its tentacles in patterns of its choice. The harmonious use of limbs is a strong sign of status amongst them. Two under semi-permanent control is considered enough for polite society.

But the more potent and respected an Aeskithete is, the more its limbs obey its will.

Their heads are horrible, like slim squid with flickering gnathopods and black fishlike eyes drilled in an eerie skull. This makes them terrible to look upon for most humanish things. Viewers are often enraptured by the horrid mystery of their bodies and the Aeskithetes are exceedingly sensitive about this. The delicate and socially-aware Aeskithetes find the frightened reactions of others troubling, and, out of shame and sympathy, they have taken to a culture of masks.

The masks are also terrifying. Abstracted creatures of the Aeskithetes home world, or madly-reconfigured beasts of this one, seen through alien eyes. They freak everybody out but the obvious and tender concern of the Aeskithetes for the feelings and perceptions of others means that people are too embarrassed to tell them this. They would prove vibrant and dangerous masks of war in human hands, if not for the fact the Aeskithetes only give their masks away to those considered friends, and no friend of the Aeskithetes has ever sold a mask.

As they describe it, the world of the Aeskithetes is an endless labyrinth of vast keratin pylons that reach up into a blurred and incomprehensible sky where the gods of the ancient Aeskithetes live. The pylon-forests are haunted by silent yet titanic beings. The only place of safety is to tunnel into the life-giving earth. Preventing this, are boiling rivers of iron running everywhere under the surface of the world, which gout forth in response to astronomical events, and a sourceless, unpredictable apocalypse which falls thunderously from the sky, obliterating all. Time runs faster there and Aeskithetes know that should they return home, many generations will have passed and all that they knew in their lives will be altered and changed. This makes them sad.

They collect art and information of every kind, to take back to their home. Knowing that whatever they return with will benefit a generation they do not know, gives Aeskithetes a keen sense of public duty and frees them somewhat from the temptations of power. They are humanists, non-prejudiced, and have excellent taste. Craft is not beyond their powers, they use tools with skill, but in the manner of the dilettante.

Their monstrous looks, their clear potential for harm and the fact that they don't use it, leads people to accord Aeskithetes the kind of respect usually afforded to large, calm men. Everybody is relieved that they are not doing something more horrible than they are. The fact that they are amazingly awful to look upon, but very pleasant to know, affords their associates a comfortable sense of their own good nature, at almost no risk to themselves they were friends with a freak and it worked out fine.

Though generally non-aggressive their extraordinary strength and toughness makes Aeskithetes well capable of self-defence. They practice dimensional magics of limited extent. They can shrink or grow, and dislocate in space and time, small volumes of non-living mass. The number of tentacles an Aeskithete can harmonize is a rough guide to what they can move and how. Two tentacles can move about a cubic foot of soil or water about six feet, and about a second back or forwards in time. As more tentacles are used, the range and potency of this effect increases, though exactly how, and what its limits are, they will not say.

They can also vomit a vile acidic bile that eats flesh on contact, but this is as horrible for them as for everyone else and they will do anything to avoid its use.

The spell or song that keeps them in our world runs continuously through an Aeskithetes mind like a chant in the back of the head. If deeply distracted, the chant will stop, they will snap back into place on their own world, disappearing from our own. This makes them very hard to kill outright.

The 'world' they come from is a person's skin. Aeskithetes are very very small, there are probably thousands of them all over you right now. Their magic refracts them through time and space, to the same huge size and slow span as a human life. How much they understand this is unknown, certainly, most Aeskithetes give no sign at all that they walk amongst their primal gods. It is possible they do not know. Even amongst mankind it is fragmentary knowledge, hoarded by a few.

There are, though, rumours. Tales of certain people captured and banished impossibly to the surface of their own skin, wandering the endless leagues of their body and the forests of their hair, escaping ticks the size of houses, terrified to scratch, knowing that if they but receive a wound in the wrong place, a vast valley of impassable gore can open up across their path, seeking for years through the scab cities and fumarole glands for the fragments of the song to bring them home. A god trapped upon a god.

But these are only tales.

ANEMONE MEN

or PEACEABLE PEOPLE

The Men Of Peace are friendly but their touch means pain and death.

They are as intelligent as men and can walk and thrive outside the oceans bounds, though they love neither bright light nor the scorching heat of the sun. The darkness is their home, where black pools kiss their rims and shiver with the oozing fall of drops that form but once in every month. There they glow silently and dream.

Each has six limbs which end in soft, inquisitive hands, a tail with numerous small, irregular finlike blades and a faceless 'head' shaped like a pitcher plant. The neckhead sprays bouquets of sensing stalks. Each sees, and waves, rippling gently in a focusing sine. If a third or more are pointing at the same thing then it is usually focusing on that. Anemone Men see in low light, their capacity for smell and touch is so far unplumbed. Capacities may differ for each one. They have a keen sense of movement in every direction and are difficult to pass by stealth, even when they sleep, the gentle echoes of the air will show your path.

The bodies are gelatinous, but firm, from three to four feet high. They phosphoresce at will or in their dreams, glowing porraceous, hyacinthine and a deep melanic blue, though many other colours have been seen.

They sleep in little homes they make themselves. Anemone Men build cones, or forts, of rock and packed-together mud. Each one roughly three feet high. Since Anemone Men can walk easily on walls and ceilings, they can build their homes all round the rims of mighty portals, or upside down across the roofs of corridors and rooms. They dream inside with heads protruding from the top, and as they dream their minds and thoughts disperse. Their sensing stalks extend, further and further apart, each blind in sleep, but moving to unconscious thoughts. They reach three or four feet from the head, spread and glowing, sensing the air but not the light.

Every single part of the Anemone Man is full of paralysing and agonising toxin that cripples, stuns and kills on contact with the skin. Never touch one.

If anything small and live (less than the radial rim of Anemone Man's vase-neck), strokes against a tendril, it is caught, quickly paralysed, agonised and stung to death, then dragged back and slowly digested. The Anemone Man in question never wakes, they dream through it all. Deaths by poison are their snores and turns.

Only if something fiercely resists, or the tendrils sense its size is large, will the Peaceable One wake up. If one wakes up, those nearby will as well. They crawl, muttering, from their homes, seeking out the thing that woke them up. Since they dream so deeply for so long, they rise in great confusion, confused and fearful of what might be real, or not, truth or nightmare blended in their minds. Their voices burble up from the centre of the neck and sound like a children being strangled by wet rags. "Is this a dream?" they say, as they crawl across the walls and ceiling, rippling with light.

The sound of their strangled-child voices in unison is terrifying.

Sometimes uneducated or recently awoken Man O Peace will try to pull the eyeballs out of peoples skulls to 'free' them as they think the eyes are the 'real' person, trapped inside a strange prison of meat.

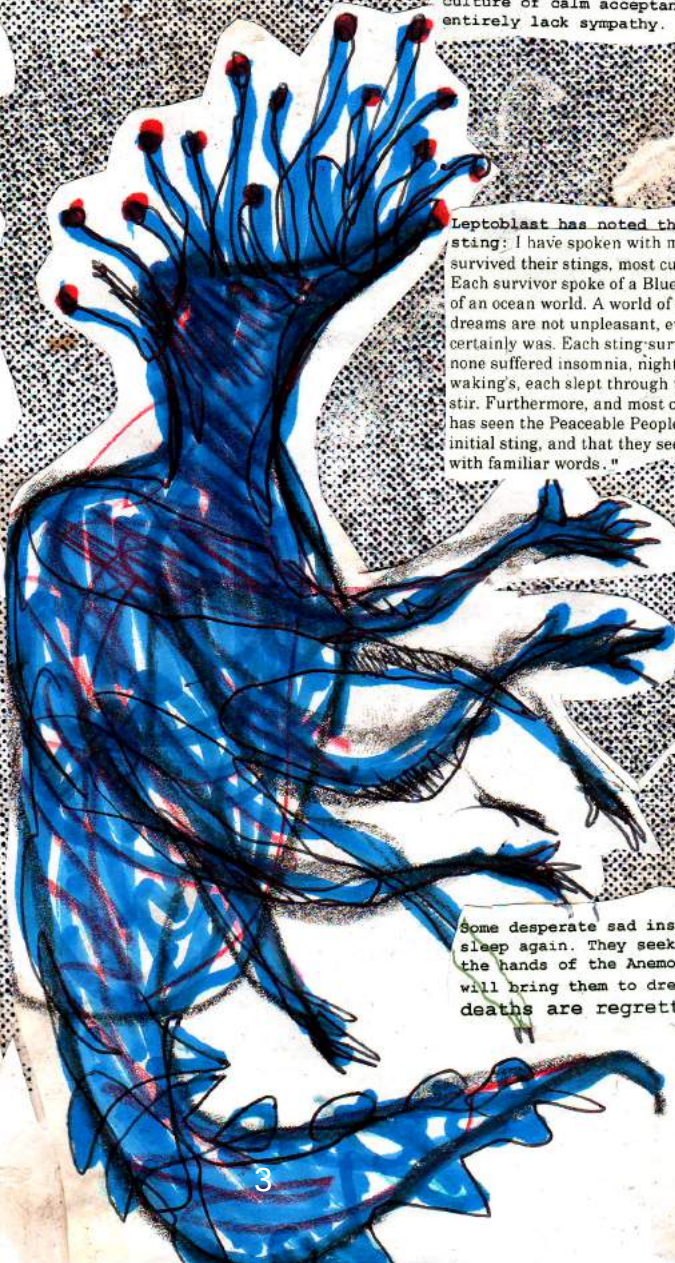
No offence intended. The Peaceable People are without prejudice of any kind and hate no-one for long. They will fight to defend themselves, but once they understand that they are awake, and you are alive, they will usually be reasonable and try not to accidentally sting you to death.

They are most often encountered as guards. They are highly reliable, need almost nothing to live on and can be left in-situ, sleeping, for very long stretches of time. (They do prefer damp air, darkness, and a pool nearby.) Lacking many hatreds as they to, and thinking all beings equally strange, they can often be employed by those whose shape or reputation keeps them set-off from the rest.

They have a relaxed, fatalistic, zen-like culture of calm acceptance, though they do not entirely lack sympathy.

Leptoblast has noted the odd effects of their sting: I have spoken with more than one who has survived their stings, most curious: they all report a dream. Each survivor spoke of a Blue Sleep which gave them visions of an ocean world. A world of the Peaceable People. The dreams are not unpleasant, even if the provoking incident certainly was. Each sting survivor said that since that event, none suffered insomnia, nightmares, terrors or strange wakings, each slept through the dark without interruption or stir. Furthermore, and most odd, one survivor claimed that she has seen the Peaceable People again, once, since receiving the initial sting, and that they seems to know her and treated her with familiar words.

Some desperate sad insomniacs will risk death to sleep again. They seek the Blue Sleep, agony at the hands of the Anemone Men, hoping survival will bring them to dream once more. Their deaths are regretted by all.



THE ANTS OF NEUTRALITY OR EQUAL ANTS

They only seem like insects from a distance, when examined closely by the eye it can be seen that they are lines. Matte black lines like those a pencil leaves upon the page, existing somehow above the surface of the world. Limbs and bodies like a sketch and dull ovoid faces.

Their gaze goes neither left nor right, their mouths remain a flat black line speaking in a murmuring monotone drone. Their eyes stay low, the nose a snub. Each has, projecting from its head and curling back over its matte black spine, a line, which flexes strangely in the presence of the Odd.

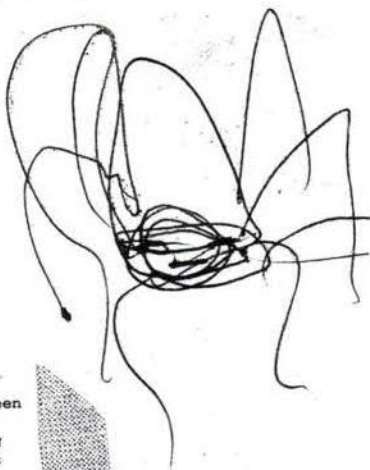
These ants are democratic, yet they always vote the same way. They voted to become the things they are and if given the chance again today, they would vote exactly the same again. They descend from an attempted Utopia. An isle where the perfect society was declared and science and magic used to keep it so. They would improve the lives of all, regardless of rank or race. Utterly equal citizens in an utterly equal land. Slowly and invisibly they came to regard difference as a loathsome thing. Though bound by law to respect all creatures as of equal worth, in their neutral hearts they loathed. Loathed anyone exceptional, unusual or unlike the rest, and, in some small way, everyone was.

Alterations were begun. First to look more average than the crowd, avoiding sticking out. Raising their children to be as utterly normal as could be conceived. Any exceptional quality suppressed and reversed by magical art. After many generations of this work, the average height began to shrink. People got smaller, to loose physical and facial form. They became a race of pygmies, then a race of living dolls. Then the colours faded, then, inexplicably, width. Then depth and weight, dimensions disappeared, only the black lines remained. The people are the Equal Isle were slipping out of existence for good.

But, something watched the Island, observed, and measured what it saw. It took the people there and brought them somewhere else. They call it only 'Exfoizoksostrin', and name it their ruler to this day. They claim it made them Sacred Beings, and gifted them with Entropic Antennae which they still wear. Now the Ants of Neutrality can be found everywhere on earth. Look for their perfectly cylindrical hives in the wasteland where the ground is exceptionally flat and the trees exceptionally symmetrical.

They are not potent beings, lacking much capacity in war, but the blessing of their patron has gifted them with the nutritional qualities of cardboard. They surrender no sustenance when consumed, meaning it is not worth the while of any living being to hunt them down, and they retain the raw intelligence of men, matched with the energy and size of ants.

Wherever they have a hive (or 'city') they send out huge work parties to even the ground all around, reducing everything to a flat level plane. If trees exist they cut branches and trim leaves until the tree either grows exactly even, or simply dies, at which point they chop it into cubes. If rivers flow nearby, they slowly and painstakingly straighten their banks. Boulders are carved down to spheres or perfect polyhedra. Footsteps are erased, blades of grass are braced



and made to grow straight, flowers are made geometrically correct. This never entirely works. The ants never give up.

The Entropic Antennae of the ants can both detect, and absorb, disturbances in chaos itself, that is to say, randomness, excession, the unusual. Rivers carry some of this, and falling rain, acts of unplanned violence and even life itself. Acts of magic, or gambling, are like explosions to them and cause them to swarm madly. Well, not 'madly', calmly, but with ferocious intent.

The Antennae dampens this quality. Their touch is cool, and it is killing you, very very slowly. (It would take being utterly covered by ants for a long time to reduce entropy enough to stop a human heart and still the blood.) Anyone beset with ants will be utterly unable to cast spells and spells will not affect the ants themselves.

Certain parties have tried to take advantage of this quality but the ants are very difficult indeed to deal with. They have no imagination whatsoever. They fear nothing, hate nothing and love nothing. Results have been mixed. If a large amount are somehow forced into a jar or large tube, and thrown, they can form a brief but powerful anti-magic field as they tumble through the air, and wherever they land. These tubes, or jars are exceedingly valuable to some.

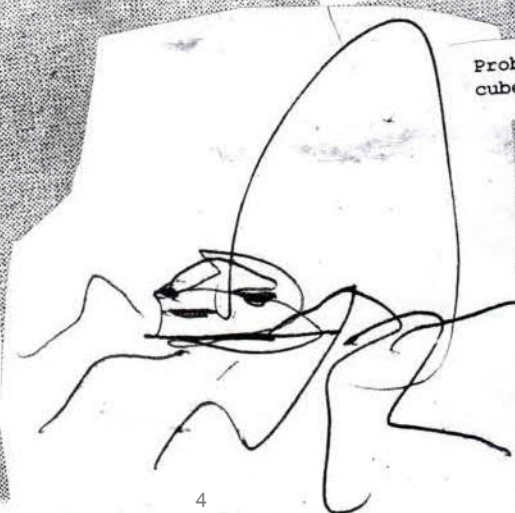
Owning one involves great danger, of a very boring kind. While imprisoned the Ants will try relentlessly to escape by any means they can imagine, which is not many, but they are persistent. Five ants will often set off in search of any abducted ants, in addition, any abducted ants that escape will begin the epically long trek back to their hive. If the two groups meet they will make a full assessment of their abductors and any unusual things they have done, then go in search of them.

When confronted by beings of startling inequality (i.e. all adventurers) they go into a state of extreme discomfort which is almost like rage. While not very dangerous so long as a party stays mobile, if they are trapped, or foolishly fall asleep, or are knocked out, in the territory of the ants, they will be restrained by carefully-engineered web-works of tiny rope and tiny chains and interrogated by a tiny tribunal in front of a vast, grey, expressionless crowd. They will be interviewed, investigated and tried for any excessive randomness, heroism, success, failure, madness or luck.

There are folk rumours of those who have escaped the ants with the clever (not too clever) use of statistics and a handy book of accounts, proving thereby that though they are adventurers, they are exceedingly average adventurers, doing pretty much what all adventurers do, in pretty much the same way.

It is not certain what happens to those found guilty, but they are never seen again.

Probably it involves lots of neat cubes.



ATROCIOUS CROWS

Called 'atrous' for their blackness first, their deeds and nature quickly earn the Crows a truer name.

The Atrocious Crow is flightless, about five and half feet tall with only vestigial wings. Its long legs take up almost half its length, they grip hard and run fast. Grime coats them all the time. The head of the Crow is domed and round, big for a bird, its beak is thick and strong. The feathers of the Crow eat light, they are as dark as dark can be, making Atrocious Crows almost invisible at night.

Atrocious Crows are cowards and it is good that they are so. If found alone or in small flocks they use their long legs to run away or climb stained trees, from which they bark out their depressive call, at a vantage point to shower acidic shit on those below. If cornered, the Crow can fight, it is lighter than a man but strong, and can use its claws and beak to gouge and stab. The shit of the Atrocious Crow is acid and diseased, it causes burns on skin and will blind if it touches an eye. The Crows know this and will pause in their escape to bend over and project a shower of shit in their defence. But this rarely occurs, few seek the Atrocious Crow and the Crows themselves most often flee from those who do.

They have a suicidal caw.

Its call sounds like a deep, dark, mocking bark: an almost-laugh. It causes sadness in most animals and organised beings. A single caw turns the mind to past failures and embarrassments, a loud cycle of singing calls to mind the inevitable nature of death and the futility of human life. When threatened the Atrocious Crow will use its call to numb and stupefy whilst fleeing for its life. Few predators pursue the crow for long, most that do give up.

If it were not for the complex nature of man, the Atrocious Crow would be barely any threat at all. Very rarely human beings are trapped within the zone of crows and cannot get away. They hear the Crow call and try too late to flee. The depressive effect sinks in; they slow and fall to their knees, then lie upon the ground. After a day of constant calls, the human spirit breaks, some simply wait and starve to death, some feel a mad surge of furious energy before the end, they leap up and hang themselves, fall upon their swords or bash their brains out on a tree. But some do not die. They change instead. Transfigured into life-in-death.

Some who hear the Crows dark call stand up and, believing they are empty and are dead, go on. These people are annihilated souls. They see now the empty machinery of the world and the horror that is life. Trapped within a cage of active flesh and bone, knowing there is no way out and nowhere left to go, they live, somehow, and breathe, when every breath is painful fire within their lungs.



They have many names but the names all mean the same. The Atrous-Men. The empty ones.

When groups or tribes of Atrous-Men exist, they become a terror on the land.

They hate life. And human life the most.

Atrous-men live naked in the woods around the shit-stained trees of the Atrocious Crows. They wear nothing, mud, or feathers of the Crows. Some think perhaps they are Crows, and cloak themselves in feathered cloaks of utter black, fashion beaks and walk on stilts uttering caws.

With human minds to guide them, the Atrocious Crows can now attack as well as run, and gather in flocks several hundred strong. They gather, tamed and guided by the Atrous-Men. Then they come en-masse, a vision of madness and despair. The Empty Ones hate gatherings. Weddings, celebrations, festivals of any kind, these put them in a rage. They like to wait till all are gathered in one place, with music, lights and dancing, then they swoop, running over the fields, cutting their way into the tents, Atrocious Crows in hundreds and amongst them, on their stilts and cloaked in black, the Atrous-Men, guiding and driving them one, waving weapons and uttering their black language.

Most are knocked into weeping passivity by the terrible calls of the Crows en-masse. Those with will enough to move, or wits enough to block their ears with wax, may try to rescue them. Any still remaining become utterly paralysed with despair, looking blankly on as the Atrocious Crows destroy. Soon, bodies lie dying on the floor, some swing from chapel rafters while Crows nose through abandoned food. Then, listlessly, the Crows and Atrous-men will eat the soft tissue and the unseeing eyes of the dead.

And the dead are lucky to be so.

If any should survive the horrid calling of the Crows, they will become new Atrous-men

AZUL

They come with the storm, and die with it.

"It's said they ride the light, leaping closer with each flash. They are renowned for rarity, ferocity, and speed. Few see an Azul in this life, or the next." - Leptoblast

"I, as it happens, am amongst this few. The size of a large bear, the Azul, at first, seems unrelated to any living thing. Not so. A little like the segmented creatures that run from the light when rotten logs are tipped. Something of the crab. And (a key point here) a great deal like the memories of the creatures held in stone. Those shield-things, the armoured ones, left there either when the stone was made, or as the dreams of some idle god. Many-legged creatures, armour-clad. The Azul is similar to those, but larger. Perhaps as the Azul lives in the air, once long ago its ancestors swam within the earth and stone. But something changed. They died and left their stony bodies to be found, while the Azul itself escaped--migrated somehow to the sky, becoming one with that light firmament as it had been with the stone before. We know it is not made of any earthly flesh

Its great differences are its size, its eyes and its vertical mouth. Its jaws open like a book held in the hands. Its teeth are inter-locked like the sides of a puzzle box or a complex carpenter's join. The jaw goes deep into the creature's mass, almost halfway, along its side are eyes arranged in vertical lines, three on each divide. Its bites leave marks like shards of broken glass.

I saw mine with the storm and only as the lightning struck, or after it. In the moments after a lightning flash, as if some invisible lamp had been kindled by the strike, a lamp emitting light that showed only one thing: the Azul. This lamp defined the depth and edges of the creature, allowing me to see it move. It lasted a handful of heartbeats. Only in that moment did it seem truly real, a huge blue-burnished monster, appearing then slowly gone, like a rapidly setting sun. As the illumination faded in the seconds after the strike, the image of the creature hollowed out. It remained, barely, when outside the light, just visible in the dark patches between trees. Its edge was outlined faintly in an aura of electric blue. The creature does not ride the light; it moves constantly and quickly, but when the lightning strikes unleash their secret glow it can be clearly seen. This makes it look as if the creature leaps from place to place. They are strong and fast and light, lighter than they should be for their size, but they move like living beings, not like ghosts or projections (Though in its aura the Azul does seem to be a giant and savage insect ghost)" - Zenithal

The clouds, to them, are hives. All heavy, piled-up, lightning-bearing storms hold, as well, Azul.

Perhaps thousands on each cloud. Perhaps they are born with the storm, living rapid lives, growing, battling, breeding, and passing away in the time it takes a cloud to broil. Perhaps they come through from some other place, only riding on the stormcloud while it lasts, then exiting before the end, the same way that they came.

They skitter over charged clouds as if they were soft earth, and hold lightning in place as if it were rope. Sometimes they fall, and, rarer still, survive.

The others gather, watching from the banks of cloud and the revetments of the storm as it moves on. Some hear their howl, calling for the fallen one.

A fallen Azul must race the lightning. It will chase after the storm, seeking the connecting point where earth and air are briefly linked. The lightning strike. If the Azul can reach a bolt just before it strikes, and leap upon it, the crackling fire will hold in place, like a rope of jagged sunlight hanging in the dark of the storm.

Azul are always terrified and angry as they chase the storm, desperate to survive. They sense where the lightning will strike next. Those wishing to follow the Azul will find this out. Should they see it climb its rope of fire, anyone with the desire and the ability to ride the storm may try to climb the lightning as it does. If they are quick, they may survive.

Azul are fast, but rarely fast enough to race the falling light. It will survive only so long as the storm is active and in view. The further the storm, the weaker it becomes: their lives are linked somehow. On death the corpse of the Azul fades slowly into an ethereal haze, then only the feel of static and ozone smell remain.

Its ghostly organs are worth incalculable sums. They must be harvested directly in the moments after death and will persist, at first, only if carefully preserved. Azul shell and organs can manipulate and hold enormous potential energies. They are capacitors of staggering power. One half its jaw, if stripped of most its teeth, and carved into shape, may form a strange and jagged staff, a tool to twist the energies of the air. It can soak up ambient charge, absorb or re-direct the lightning's path. Translucent, solid, seeming not-quite-real, humming with a halo of blue light that highlights it against the night, it is a rare and favoured symbol.

BEDLAM BIRDS



The cruelty, cunning and fearful look of the Bedlam Bird leads many to consider them demonic or undead. They are not. They are mortal and marsupial, distant kin to the Platypi.

The birds are about three feet high, although the serrated beak itself can sometimes be a foot and a half long. They wear their skulls outside their skins and the eyes, which seem black pits, have tiny living orbs recessed within. If you smashed open the head you would find flesh inside, and pumping blood. They see well in the dark.

The little flipper-paws are not much use, though small things can be grasped and moved around. A key, a map, a children's toy. They make no use of tools, except for doors. And latches and locks, which they know well. They cannot pick locks. Thank god.

The Bedlam Bird is, by the analysis of man, about as intelligent as a young boy, though with the cunning of a torturer or corrupted judge. They understand language after listening for a while. They can talk, for themselves, in growling whines of one word, or sometimes two words long. Yet they mimic very well and can rattle off verbatim long strings of things they've heard in perfect simulation of the voice they heard them in. They use this trick to bait and mock their prey, which they enjoy. Even more than they enjoy eating it.

Strangely, to the senses of enlightened minds, Bedlam Birds detect as evil, yet no tool or spell affecting evil seems to affect them. The circles, charms and prayers specifically arranged to defend the user from evil beings, do nothing, and treat the Bedlam Bird as if it were not only natural, which it is, but neutral, which it certainly is not.

They understand religion at least well enough to mock its believers. When a speaker for the gods attempts to exorcise or banish them as daemons or undead, they play along. For a while. Then leap up laughing with the spell having taken no effect.

They can sense a sliver of thought, and this may be part of what has made them mad. A Bedlam Bird can always tell when something is looking at it, no matter how far. They are impossible to spy on by any means and can only be approached by stealth by someone willing not to look upon the bird itself. Even hearing one can tip them off, the bird will twitch, knowing that someone, somewhere is listening and can hear it move. They hide so well that few who live have ever seen one whole with those who have so close to mad their stories seem like supernatural tales.

They can move quite quickly, at about the speed of a running child, and through dense cover, which they prefer, to lend assistance to their stealth. They swim moderately well and will use rivers and littoral zones in the enactment of their schemes. In addition to its speed, stealth, mimicry, intelligence its huge and gouging beak and its low-level telepathy, the Bedlam Bird, like the Platypus, carries poison spines upon its wrists. This poison sends the victim utterly insane, causing the Bedlam Birds to laugh hysterically. Which does not help.

Tactics of the Bedlam Birds can vary a great deal, but a perennial favourite is the tracking and derangement of small groups in the wilderness and wilds. A party camping, or, most gleefully, a family barricaded in its house. They like to find families in isolated homes, send the parents mad, and leave them raving with the children.

They will steal, kill horses and dogs, sometimes let themselves be seen by children, madmen or the old who will not be believed. They love to step out of the dark before the very drunk. They like asylums. Especially those for the veterans of war.

They spoil food, wreck fences, madden and mutilate cattle and sheep. They harass and mock in the night and keep people awake. They lure single people away from the group with mimicked sound.

In small settlements they may wait for a funeral then sneak into the graveyard and dig up the body. Sometimes dragging it through town in the night and leaving it inverted or strewn shamefully naked on the steps of a temple or a church.

They will hold off the direct sight of their forms for as long as possible, until they are certain that no-one will escape, and to enjoy the shock and horror they create when seen directly for the first, and last, time.

If captured or surrounded they will deal, but only to do future harm. They will hurl themselves upon the ground, rolling in the dirt and beg forgiveness, making much of their degraded state. They will say and do anything to avoid death. Never trust them.

If Bedlam Birds have one positive quality it is that they are equally horrible to everyone. They will not serve Necromancers, Dark Lords or Evil Masters any more than they would serve you. They may trick and assault them if they think they can get away with it. The monsters of the wilds despise them too. Giants hate them as the birds chase them, cut their Achilles tendons and drive them insane. Everybody hates the Bedlam Bird. It is almost the only thing on which Monsters and Men can always agree. Genocidal wars have paused briefly so that both sides could concentrate on killing a nest of Bedlam Birds. They scream and burble wonderfully when burnt alive, their oily flesh and feathers go up with a popping, snapping white flame.

They taste bad.

THE BLATHERING BIRD

Frustrating and enraging, the blathering bird does little but harm.

The Blathering Bird is an intelligent Crane that stands about as tall as a man on a pair of exceedingly long red legs. Its bill is a soft pink and its feathers pale celadon green like glazed pottery and sapphire blue in complex patterns that vary bird-to-bird.

Though they are born mute, at a young age the Blathering Birds like to seek out populated places like markets and cities and listen. They are attracted to the murmur of speech en masse. They love crowds, small or large. The young birds listen here and learn human languages extremely quickly. By talking with children and aged people who will tolerate them for a while they learn the art of conversation. Except the Blathering Bird never really learns to converse, it learns to talk.

The bird is unable to stop speaking for more than a minute. This is no curse, the bird is simply certain that whatever it has to say is pertinent to the conversation. It has the verbal intelligence and memory of a man, but the crazed monomaniacal certainty of a bird.

If people are speaking about a particular topic, the bird will remember a story it thinks relates to it directly. If about a skill, the bird will reluctantly admit that it happens to be especially skilled in that particular thing and then relate a long story of how this came to be so. If they are discussing a person, the bird knows them too, or somebody just like them, or has a valuable opinion on the nonetheless.

The Blathering Bird knows a lot of jokes. You can sense quite clearly when it wishes to speak, its pink beak becomes even pinker and its eyes narrow, as if the hidden inner pressure of its desire was boiling inside it. Sometimes it weeps pink tears and whimpers a little before it blurts out words, especially if it knows it should not speak.

When it is comfortable and safe, the Blathering Bird talks a great deal, when it is in danger or under stress, it talks even more.

The Blathering Bird does not actually want to derail conversations, interrupt everyone, talk endlessly about itself, filling the air with a continuous blur of labyrinthine personal recollections, prevent any meaningful plan being decided on or to annoy anyone to the point where they grab it by the neck and choke it to death. It does not want to do these things, it is simply sure that whatever it has to say right now, whatever fact it just remembered, whatever story it just recalled, whatever humorous point it just gleaned, this exact moment, is the most important, the most useful, the most pertinent, the most amusing thing that anyone present can or could say.

It is impossible for the Blathering Bird to believe anything else about the Blathering Bird.

The Bird does have an almost perfect memory for its own life, or at least the stories of its own life. Listeners get the sense that the Blathering Bird translates anything it experiences directly into an amusing or informative recollection and remembers it in that form, that everything they do or say is being mined constantly for future speech.

There is the famous (and verified) case of the Blathering Bird at the banquet who found itself so interesting that it forgot to eat and starved to death.

People both loathe the Blathering Bird, yet also find it useful. The most common form of death for the Bird is to be strangled by an enraged human screaming something like "STOP. JUST SHUT UP. SHUT. UP!!!!" However, the Birds can be a valuable source of information, if you can stand to listen through their Blather.

Settlements will not tolerate them for very long. This causes the Blathering Bird to fly on to another populated place where it will start relating news about its former home. Despite its irritating nature this makes the bird quite useful for connecting remote settlements and making sure they have news of each other.

In some places a certain person, perhaps an old grandmother or untouchable, is assigned the job of listening to the bird in case it says anything meaningful. Once its store of knowledge has been drained, another group of formally attired pensioners will approach the Bird and drive it off with small (non-lethal) pebbles. The Bird will keep talking as it flies away and will often return a few times over the next few hours as it just 'remembered something'.

Blathering Birds have saved lives. They have also driven people mad.

Should a Blathering Bird see a small group of travellers lost in the wilderness it will fly down, not to help them, but to talk to them. However, should they ask questions like "How do we get out of this Desert?", "Where can we find water?" or "Where is the nearest town?" the Bird will probably (eventually) tell them what they need to know.

Prisoners and escaped slaves trekking through the desolate wastes have sometimes been drawn towards hidden water holes by the sound of the Birds endless talking as it addresses the frogs and worms of its pond. After weeks without human contact they have sometimes found comfort in the Birds talking, for a while.

Hermits, Monks and Smugglers loathe them and the Blathering Bird is regarded as a minor kind of daemon by several religious orders. Criminals call traitors to the gang 'Blatherers' and the anonymous gift of a Blathering Bird feather or one of its feet, is a coded threat of death for anyone thinking of betraying a secret scheme.

Some crimelords have been known to wear cloaks of the green and blue feathers of the bird, symbolising their willingness and ability to punish those who would expose them. The 'Second Chancellor' of Jukai city famously wears a ruff of Blue and Green feathers which is generally assumed to indicate that they are the hidden spymaster of the city. (Though even more laterally-minded observers claim this is a double-bluff and the feathers prove the Second Chancellor is not the spymaster and is simply drawing attention away from someone else.)

Only the male of the Blathering Bird is known to speak, the females are a soft grey and are rarely seen. It is suspected that they possess the same cognitive capacity as the male bird but employ it in a more birdlike way, to outwit predators and stay hidden.

Ashkott has suggested that the Blathering speech of the Bird has adapted in the same way as a peacocks tail, an apparently useless affectation that puts enormous pressure of the organism, ensuring that only the most healthy and vital manage to breed.

BOA BOY

Boa Boys are awful things, they should simply be allowed to die.

Their creation is simple, horrible and relatively cheap, at least compared to the assemblage of any other kind of mangled necromantic half-man. To make Boa Boy requires a fresh baby corpse, an adolescent boa constrictor and a magic wielder of middling skill and no moral core. The snake is the most expensive part, one must be found with growth-potential, Boa Boys can get quite big.

Ashkott - "Take care in securing the snake. Feed it first to slow it down. Have your baby head prepared. Chilled is best though some advise pickling in brine if ice cannot be found.

SWIFTLY decapitate the snake. (Have the body clamped, it will writhe and flex.) Begin reading the ritual aloud, bring the parts into union. Please be sure that the spines match closely or all your work will be lost and you must begin again, I cannot stress this strongly enough. As you clamp and sew, the vitality of the dying snake should flow into, and reanimate the child-parts that remain.

The temptation exists to place more than the head onto the neck of the snake, perhaps to include shoulders and a torso to create a kind of Boa-Centaur. Please DO NOT attempt this. There is only enough life in the snake to return the head of the child to life, as greater sections of flesh are included the vitality required increases exponentially. The end result should be an active, questing being with a keen hunger. Several mice should be kept on hand to feed the new construct and to lure it onto a secure zone. Even with care taken in preservation there will be some loss of higher functions due to necrotization of the brain, but, happily, this can often aid with re-training.

All in all I found it a simple and efficient process, leading to an effective and highly-replicable result. I am astonished at the remaining legal prejudice against this procedure. Certainly, if any children were actually killed to provide the necessary materials then I could understand the general public reluctance, but the bodies of dozens of children are simply thrown away each week in any major city! A total economic loss! I can only hope that my analysis leads to a more rational and reasonable allocation of resources in the future."

Without the glands and fluids of a human being, the head never develops in a fully adult way, retaining the proportions of a child, its skin stays smooth, no new hair grows, its gender never sharpens into view. Once returned to 'life', a Boa Boy can easily be trained. Their intelligence develops at the same rate as a human boy, and they are easily made loyal. The vital urges of the snake remain and, since the human jaw cannot distend, they must be fed small prey every few hours. Catching mice is hard for something the size of the growing Boa Boy with only-human eyes and primate teeth. Constant and regular feeding leads them to see their owner in a parent's role. Without them, they are told, they would soon starve.

Boa Boys are rarely illegal to create, so long as you own the snake and didn't kill the child yourself. Since there is no fully-corporeal reanimation of the corpse, the resulting construct counts as property in most laws. Cities with strong codes on the use of beasts may take some issue with the harming of the snake.

Boa Boys are kept to guard palatial houses while owners sleep, or while its keepers are away. They can be trained to talk, just like a human boy, and think. Their giant Constrictor bodies make them poor at chasing prey but they can be very effective against men, they can trap, crush and question all at the same time. A Boa Boy that clamps a thief will be well rewarded, perhaps even let out of its box for a whole day. Not in daylight though. They are frowned on in society, kept out of sight, it is a sign of extreme eccentricity and indifference for an aristocrat to let their Boa Boys about in daylight hours, or where guests can see.

To speak to them as if they are true children, or develop relationships with one, is a sign of madness or decadence. Always popular in ballads and cheap popular theatres is the character of the 'Snake Widow', a rich old woman with no surviving sons, whose family never come, who roams her homes empty corridors, talking to her 'boys'. In these stories, usually the Boa Boy gets jealous and crushes her to death, or sometimes tries to warn her against the schemes of a handsome rogue who seduces her and steals everything.

The snake always dies at the end.

It is not uncommon for young girls to taunt each other with cries of 'snake lady!', meaning, not that they have the qualities of a snake, but that they are unmarried, and therefore worthless.

Sometimes the 'castoffs' are retained and recombined. The body of a child with the head of a snake. They are hard to keep alive and not very useful, but some clients do insist on having the pair, for their own amusement.

Some Boa Boys do not stay loyal. They slowly work out what they are and how they came to be. They grow to understand what others took. Some go mad. Some go berserk. And some stay silent, thinking and planning. They have the body of a powerful beast, the intelligence of a man and free access to the house when all others sleep. Much could be done with such things.

BOA CONSTRUCTOR

or SERPENT DACTYLIS

Born with what seems to be a crippling mutation, the Boa Constructor must ferociously adapt to stay alive. It has a four-staged life, Brunneous, Xanthic, Pavonated and Griseous. Most die along the way, unable to face the challenge of their size or grasp the opportunities presented by their hands. Those who reach the last stage, the Griseous few, are rare and barely seen, they sleep within their palaces, but their works are world-renowned.

On emerging from its egg, the Boa Constructor is about the size of its near-equivalent: the Boa Constrictor. In its infant form it looks much like a normal snake and its intelligence is not much more than that. They are born a dark brown and life for the Brunneous Boa Constructor is hard. Unlike any other kind of snake it has, instead of pointed fangs and poison glands: hands. Its mouth is full of rows of tiny arms with hands upon their tiny wrists. At its smallest size these hands are not much use, it lacks the wits to manipulate them well, and even if it could, there is not much in the tiny world for it to do. It can just about strangle a mouse.

So most Boa Constructors die young.

BRUNNEOUS

If it finds a way to stay alive the Boa Constructor grows, its brunneous colouring turns light like sunlit stone. It must grow larger than almost any normal snake, when its head is roughly the size of a large bucket the dreams begin. Haptic dreams of touch and feel, prompted by its active hands. Perhaps a natural and inevitable result of growth, or it may simply be that any Boa Constructor capable of surviving this long must learn or die.

The snake becomes more capable of complex acts. Its tooth-hands now do more than grip and pull, they can test, manipulate, discover and arrange. The Boa Constructor becomes aware that, rather than jamming its body between rocks or branches to slough off its skin, it can undress itself. It does this carefully, slowly teasing apart its brunneous covering, beneath the fading brown is bright summer-yellow. The snake enters its Xanthic phase.

XANTHIC

From this point on, the Boa Constructor learns, but more: it knows that it can learn. It sets out to understand the world and what it is. It learns through objects: in a tactile way, putting them inside its mouth and rolling them through its tooth-hands. The enormous sensitivity and awareness of these hands gives it a deep understanding of the nature of material things. It learns first to tie knots, then to make simple twine and rope, to sharpen and blunt stones, to cut. This is a dangerous time for man. The Xanthic Boa Constructor retains most of the instincts of a snake, and adds to this the use of tools and traps. It can make snares, set spikes, dig pits, hold weapons, even throw sharp stones from its mouth. Xanthic Constructors knap primitive pseudoteeth, sharpened stones arranged so that the snake can 'bite' for the first time.

The Boa Constructor grows.

Possessing tools now of its own, the Boa Constructor becomes aware of things not made by it, of other tools. Other tools imply other minds. Things with hands, like its hands, that make things as it does. Slowly, a new category opens up inside its mind: 'Not-Food'.

PAVONATED

The Pavonated Boa Constructor is truly huge. Now its yellow scales are patterned diamond blue, shaped like the eyes on peacock wings. The Constructor becomes interested in communication with the 'Not Food'. Another round of deaths begins. Most Boa Constructors who survive this long, die trying to make contact with thinking beings. So far they cannot speak and understand language as derivative of tools, as 'tools of sound', not the other way around. If they have been in the same area for some time the growing Boa Constructor will have trapped and eaten quite a few of the 'Not-Food' in its early years.

Should it succeed, a new phase in its life will open up.



GRISEOUS

A Griseous Boa Constructor is the mass of a small house. Its blue-grey patterns expand and the shrinking dots of yellow slowly fade and disappear. It speaks but in a whisper, snake lungs were never meant to project breath. So huge now, that few environments can support it for long. But a market of trade can.

The things a Griseous Boa Constructor can achieve with its almost-man-sized teeth-hands are incredible. Almost a hundred skilled limbs can act in concert on the same object. It can weave a tapestry in minutes. It can sculpt a statue in an hour or two. It can build and repair simple machines and it can do all of these things much faster than even a team of skilled workers.

As it picks up skills and accumulates wealth, the Griseous Boa Constructor can grow huge indeed. Its Pseudoteeth, instead of stones, are now master-crafted weapons, tools, devices and small but lethal machines. Some are the blades of those brave or foolish to challenge the Boa Constructor. It keeps these hung around its neck in case of use, or held by one of its attendants in case it should equip for harm.

The tooth-hands are individually skilled combatants, working perfectly in sequence or alone. The bite of a Griseous Boa Constructor is like fighting a hundred expert duellists in one go. They can load and fire quite well, meaning the Boa Constructor can effectively vomit bowfire. Some develop one-of-a-kind explosive-projectile weapons only they can understand.

But it is rare for a griseous Boa Constructor to offer battle, they are too careful, too rich and too bound up in the careful economy of the world. They have financial interests. They also need to eat at least one large cow almost every day to stay active and alive, so they need to be rich.

ITS CREATIONS

The art of the Boa Constructor is usually well-known. They are excellent architects and builders. Their sculpture is renowned. They can also build weapons, armour and unusual machines.

To be armoured by a Boa Constructor, or sculpted by one, requires gigantic wealth and lots of nerve. The snake must learn your shape. To do so, it picks you up bodily, rolling you around its mouth, testing and feeling your limbs. When it has fully considered your form, the Griseous snake constructs a sculpture, or a suit of plate to match. Its sculptures are always remarkable and the suits of armour that it makes are composed strangely, differently each time, with choices no human armorer would ever make. Nevertheless they work perfectly, for the person for whom they were made. Many become subjects of study once the owner has passed on.

On reaching its apparently-maximum size, the Griseous Boa Constructor starts work on its palace. Incredible formations. A fortress-palace-pleasure dome, built as if by a thousand skilled hands, yet with the mind, and for the body of a gigantic snake. They are few but astonishing to look upon. No two are remotely alike. The Boa Constructor disappears inside its palace, with its wealth and incredible tools, and does not emerge. They do not like to be disturbed. Reports of the interior are few. Those who go in generally do not come back. They speak of halls and columns, carved in exquisite detail, but arranged for no human form or size. There, people creep along the oddly-arranged buttresses like insects climbing on a human wall, the dry and cavernous interior silently unfolding all around. What the snake is doing there, sleeping, building, experimenting on impossible things, is unknown to all.

The Boa Constructor is always minded like a snake. Its desires and instincts remain that of a snake, simply with massively added intelligence and more toleration, and perhaps respect, for living things that are 'Not Food'.

It can be civil.

It is never safe.

BOG ELF

The Bog Elves live beneath our world, in an inverse mirror-version of their own whose portal is the still water of the mere. They may be a nation, a species or simply failed members of some distant race, banished to the mirror of the moors for some unknown failure or wrong. Perhaps all Elves could live beneath the bog if they so wished.

Few do.

They are pale and bald, slender and shorter than men, with long thin arms. They make steel there in the other world, but whatever they burn instead of coal leaves strange impurities in the forge. Their swords are always short and wide and the blades are sometimes stained with green, as if a vine grew spiralling inside the steel, pressing against its sides. The hilts of their swords and the shafts of their spears are always a dense black bog-hardened wood.

They are each armoured differently, with things seized and stolen in the bog, or drawn from the long cycles of its time. The first order clad in closely arranged bone, a chainmail of the skeletons of fish and eels. The second type wear scale woven from the overlapping beaks of storks and cranes. The third have armour stolen from the dead, but always altered in some way, its joints bound with the shining skins of fish, edged with the sharp teeth of frogs or simply woven with lilies. Always made more beautiful and strange. It is said the lords of the Bog Elves wear sheets of stained and pierced paperthin gold, made brittle by slowly expanding smargadine rust, brought on by the alien chemistry of their home.

The masters of the Bog Elves are judged by their stillness and the subtlety of their plans. For one to move too much could bend or tear its sheath of brittle gold, leaving bright seams of shining gleam to show the lines where it has flexed. To move rapidly or be surprised is a sign of incompetence, innocence or youth, none of which are valued qualities in the Bog Elf world. Therefore the greatest are known to be those who see furthest, know most and seem to do the least. Their greatest minds sit whispering on thrones of black wood, caked in overlapping robes of strangely punctured gold, weaved with bright green stains of expanding fungal decay to illustrate the long reach of their thoughts.

They walk in a world where the floor is a shining sheet of glass, the sky a dense stew of darkness and dying things. In every direction they see pools of shadow, which, to them, is like a liquid in which they can swim. The bravest can enter these pools and dive to the bottom, entering thereby a world of shadow, very distant from our own, and having converse with the beings there.

They bridge these pools with arches of black wood hoarded over hundreds of years, they assemble homes and palaces upon these arcs and their palaces are dark beautiful to behold. Careful creations of painstakingly recovered wood, held together by vibrantly coloured and madly shaped fungal blooms, diligently bred and guided for this purpose. Lit by fireflies, fungus and lanterns in the upturned skills of enemies and friends.

The shining glass floor of this world is simply still water on ours. What, in our world, are patches of solid land, on the other, are the pools of shadow. By placing their only permanent structures away from the shining glass surface on which they walk the Bog Elves ensure that no-one can find them.

They can be seen sometimes at night as they transit on the other side of the reflected world. A traveller might look into the water of the bogs under the moon and see below the pale faces of the Elves going from place to place. But they are stealthy and quick and will easily escape notice.

If the traveller should decide to try capturing one of these strange figures, and dive into the water, ninety nine times out of a hundred they will simply find themselves having jumped into a shallow bog. The water shatters, the reflection is gone, they emerge drenched.

Should they be skilful, lucky, wise in craft, or deeply learned in the secrets of the Elves, they may actually smoothly enter the other world. This would be very bad for them. They would find themselves standing on a smooth glassy surface, glowing either with refracted sunlight, if day, or distant starlight if night. They will be right next to a pool of liquid shadow, exactly where the solid ground they dived from was, and they will be surrounded by angry Bog Elves. In the glassy floor beneath their feet will be the twisted image of the place they left.

Despite the weird, secret and magical nature of the Bog Elves they do still need material things. They war ceaselessly with the Potemkimen, whom they loathe, striving to outwit and delude the amphibian freaks. It is not certain how the war is going, or even exactly when and how the battles take place. The conflict is composed mainly of feints, deceptions and decade-long double-bluffs, but the Bog Elves are certain of their own eventual victory. This war requires resources, and they do live in a bog, there is a limit to how much it can provide, even for patient and immortal race.

The Bog Elves trade in liquid shadow, delivered in vial and philtres made from the shells of snails. They dive for this in the depthless pools of darkness underneath their fortress homes. The depth of the dive indicates the darkness of the shadow and the blackness of the shade and the size of the snail that made up its vial decide how much gold it is worth.

This strange substance can be refined and altered in a number of ways and is much sought by mages, madmen and secret cults. It can also be used 'raw' poured over or onto something to cloak it in shadows, wherever it happens to be.

For prodigious cost, or in dire extremes, the Bog Elf lords may sanction an embassy to the reality of shadows that lies beyond the bottom of the midnight pools below their span-castles. A favoured few may be allowed to dive themselves into the pools of darkness or lowered on a silver chain, with a bodyguard of expert shadow divers to ensure they survive the journey.

"Why are they drunk, and on what? This was my question. I was soon to find out.

From the conversations of the rich I had thought the Melanic Moors and the tribes of Swamp-Drunks there to be little more than an irrelevant scattering of primitives living in the marshlands all around the bay.

other way around.

As I listened more and spoke less, and descended deeper into the city, I found that knowledge and news of the Drunks and the Moors bubbled beneath the surface of the cities conversation like a cyst beneath the skin. Stories of the tribes of the Moors: the Dismals, Great Dismals, Thesingers, Morokle-Men and the feared Fluke Boys, as well as the doings of the notable characters of the Moors: 'Her-Face' Shah Lun, Nine-Hundred Wilson, Cithonic Jones and Tenberous Djang, were on the lips of all classes, though only the poorest would speak directly to me on the subject, the rest spoke only amongst themselves, as if they guarded an open secret.

It was only from an apparently homeless woman sitting on a disused landward dock of one of the poorest towers that I was able to learn exactly why the Swamp Drunks are drunk so much." - Z

"The Melanic Moors cannot be navigated by the conscious mind. The Moors themselves are a several broken archipelagos of reeds and black water, a maze of creeks and waterways, lakes, wetlands, insects and broad floating islands, a baffling labyrinth of reed beds, sunken forests, acidic mangroves and dismal pools. No one can be sure exactly where they start or end, whether one environment or several linked. Even without any other natural quality, they would present an incredible challenge to navigation. But some unknown quality of the Moors, some secret force, makes their pathways impossible to rationally understand. Any sane intelligent person attempting to move through them will find themselves travelling in circles, faced with impossibly branching paths, drawing maps that make no sense, unable to describe or understand where they are or should be. If they are very lucky they will go insane before they starve to death.

Only a deranged mind can move safely through the moors. You must be mad, drunk, drugged or half asleep. Only then, with the conscious analytical part of the mind baffled and closed off, may you move by clever instinct, as the animals do, and find your way.

It is for this reason that the tribes of the Melanic Moors are named 'Swamp-Drunks' and it is this that makes up one of the few points of continuity between the baffling miscellany of cultures in the Moors.

There, insanity is valued over sanity, the inability to hold your drink or drugs is thought highly of, rather than the other way around. (Anyone who can get drunk easily is a cheap and reliable guide.) It is common for childhood to be valued over adulthood, dreams over reason, instability and intuition over reason and reliability. Though by no means absolute amongst all Swamp-Drunk cultures, these factors do present a common theme.

Professional guides usually keep a bottle of strong spirits on them at all times in case of emergencies. Some tribes specialise in certain drugs: some keep insane people to guide them, small families can be seen floating past on reed beds, guided by half-asleep children." - Leptoblast

SWAMP DRUNKS

"There is an extensive economic relationship between the City and the Moors.

The population of the Moors is sparsely distributed but the Moors themselves are huge. There are reaches of which even the Deep-Drunks do not speak. The total population may be very large indeed.

Trade directly with the Drunks is banned and there are regular attempted punitive expeditions in response to some outrage or act of piracy. As well as a flickering state of inconstant conflict. The two cultures are bound closely together.

I estimate as much as a third of the total mainland trade of Juaki comes from this illegal source.

The Moors supply, or transmit from further on: rare and or aromatic woods (for example gaharu, sandalwood, sappan and Jorm wood), muscoons, Silks, Virid Steel, Caged Fruit Hounds, the leaves of the Catastrophic Tree, the feathers of the Blathering Bird, the Sanguine Crane, of Hornbills, Peacocks and Kingfishers, Snapkegs and Snapkeg parts, rare forms of art, war-puppets, bezoar stones, dried organs of swamp fauna, aloe wood, hostages, edible birds nests, honey, beeswax, rice, opium, rubies, riddles, sapphires, liquid shadows in the shells of snails, a variety of spices, the services of Hex Dragoons, diseased spines and many other things.

In the other direction flow all kinds of manufactured goods: machetes, axes, tools, pots and pans, lamps, fuel, candles, sheets, clothes, weapons, fast shallow draft boat, sail, drugs and a truly staggering amount of alcohol.

All of this is carried on secretly, or semi-secretly. Yet the trade is so vast and so important to both cultures that, though they both feign independence from, and contempt for, each other, if it were to ever cease they would both be ruined.

The balance of power shifts endlessly between the two. The borders of the Moors by the bay are dotted with the abandoned watchtowers of failed alcoholic colonisation. Now more usually bases for smuggling operations. At times explosive tribes have threatened the towers of Juaki. They are swiftly absorbed, incorporated into the cities history, government and mythology." - Ashkott

"The Mystery of the Moors! A tantalising secret sought by many and postulated, theorised on and discussed by courtiers. No man is without a theory of his own: The 'Second God' theory, supposing the Moors a kind of Twin to the Forest of Jorm, the 'Ten Shadows' theory put forth by Stammel claiming the Moors as the seat of some ancient power, a mere emission of the reeds, a special kind of pollen, the bite of a specific moor-bound insect, a simple curse of Subtle Art, great black gates down beneath the deepest pools leaking forth the logic of some other world, space stolen from the world and worked into an alternative mirror-land.

No one knows. But the discoverer would become famous throughout the world!" - Leptoblast

BRAINSTORMER

The Brainstormer believes they read the mind of the sky.

To become one requires intelligence, obsession, tremendous resources, a questionable grip on mental health, and time. All to gather and distill a golden crackling fluid composed of lightning and madness. The Elixir Anemoi.

The elixir is composed primarily of collected lightning strikes, at least a thousand are required. To gather them, would-be Brainstormers like to occupy high mountains in tempestuous lands, secreting their equipment in fortified peaks, building copper spires and praying for storms. Waiting, perhaps for years until the fluid glows its golden hue, ripe with electrical power and the hidden discharge of the sky.

Before even that process begins, the elixir itself must be devised. It is composed of the concentrated and purified bile of certain eels. It also needs traces of certain rare metals and compounds, carefully processed. Most difficult to attain are the body-parts of various electrically-related creatures, which activate the potion. The spine of an Azul, for instance, is necessary before the end, and they are very hard to get.

Only a small amount of the golden Elixir Anemoi is made, all of it is required. It is insanely valuable and anyone creating it will take exceptional pains to hide and protect what they are doing.

The Brainstormer must hone and whet their mind through avid concentration and deep thought, to make it ready for its commune with the sky. The strange refracted minds of clouds and storms can be a rapid maze of vectored thought to those who taste them for the first. The Brainstormer must ready themselves to not only understand, but control these atmospheric psychologies.

A number of syringes must be made. These should be things of exceptional and precise craft. Copper, each with a cruciform end. Each syringe is filled with the Elixir Anemoi.

Well all is prepared, the Brainstormer will shave their own head, they will drill holes in their skull at certain exactly-placed points. This is actually the least-dangerous part of the process.

And then, in once precise movement, the syringes are driven into the brain. The Elixir Anemoi floods certain selected organs of the mind. Sublime awareness. The Brainstormer feels, for the first time, that complex ecology of ever-adjusting, never-ceasing thought and dream that makes up the inverse world of air above our own. The unspoken poetry of the sky, the secret driver of the winds.

At this point every Brainstormer on record has gone completely fucking nuts.

Their eyes unfocus, they begin to drool. Between the copper crosses of the syringes injecting golden light, a network of crackling electrical fire leaps into being.

Before the process begins all would-be Brainstormers are careful to inform their lackeys and servants that the levels of Elixir must be carefully and continually adjusted to avoid disaster. Once the first dose is taken and the halo of electricity begins, the Brainstormer reacts to anyone trying to adjust or alter the syringes in any way by screaming madly, firing bolts of electricity and sometimes sucking them up into a tornado. From this point on the levels will adjust themselves.

If they speak at all it is usually to inform anyone still remaining nearby of their new title, (they all re-name themselves and this is how they become known to history: The Sultan of Storms, The Tempest Khan, The Baron Boreal, The Cycloczar, Great Psychotophon) and to inform people that they are certainly not insane, that they are the first ones to truly understand the process and will be the first to truly master it, the others were fools... FOOLS!

Clouds and storms begin to gather in the air above the Brainstormer. They achieve a frightening density. The inside of the gigantic storm cloud will be shaped into a kind of palace-dungeon that matches the Brainstormers conscious and unconscious mind.

Some parts make sense and seem to bear the marks of deliberate design, others, as if they were created by an architect on drugs, or in a dream. Everything is there for a reason, its simply that the reason is insane. The Brainstormer is broadly unaware of the exact nature of their palace. To them, everything is as it should be, things are going well, the experiment was a success.

Though the geography of the Palace is their creation, it is not under their continual control. Once things are built up in the original flurry of invention, corridors and room and halls cannot be re-shaped without breaking the coherency of the storm. (Although of course, the whole thing does tend to rotate quite fast.) Sometimes the front or bottom of the storm will be re-shaped into a rough approximation of the Brainstormers face, from which they will speak to the people below in a voice of thunder and hurricane.

When they are satisfied with the creation of their new abode, the Brainstormer will summon forth a Tornado from the storm. A whirling finger of darkness will reach down to touch the earth. Inside this annihilating vortex will be a silent calm core, and a spiralling stairway, which the Brainstormer will ascend. From this point on they dwell within the heart of the storm.

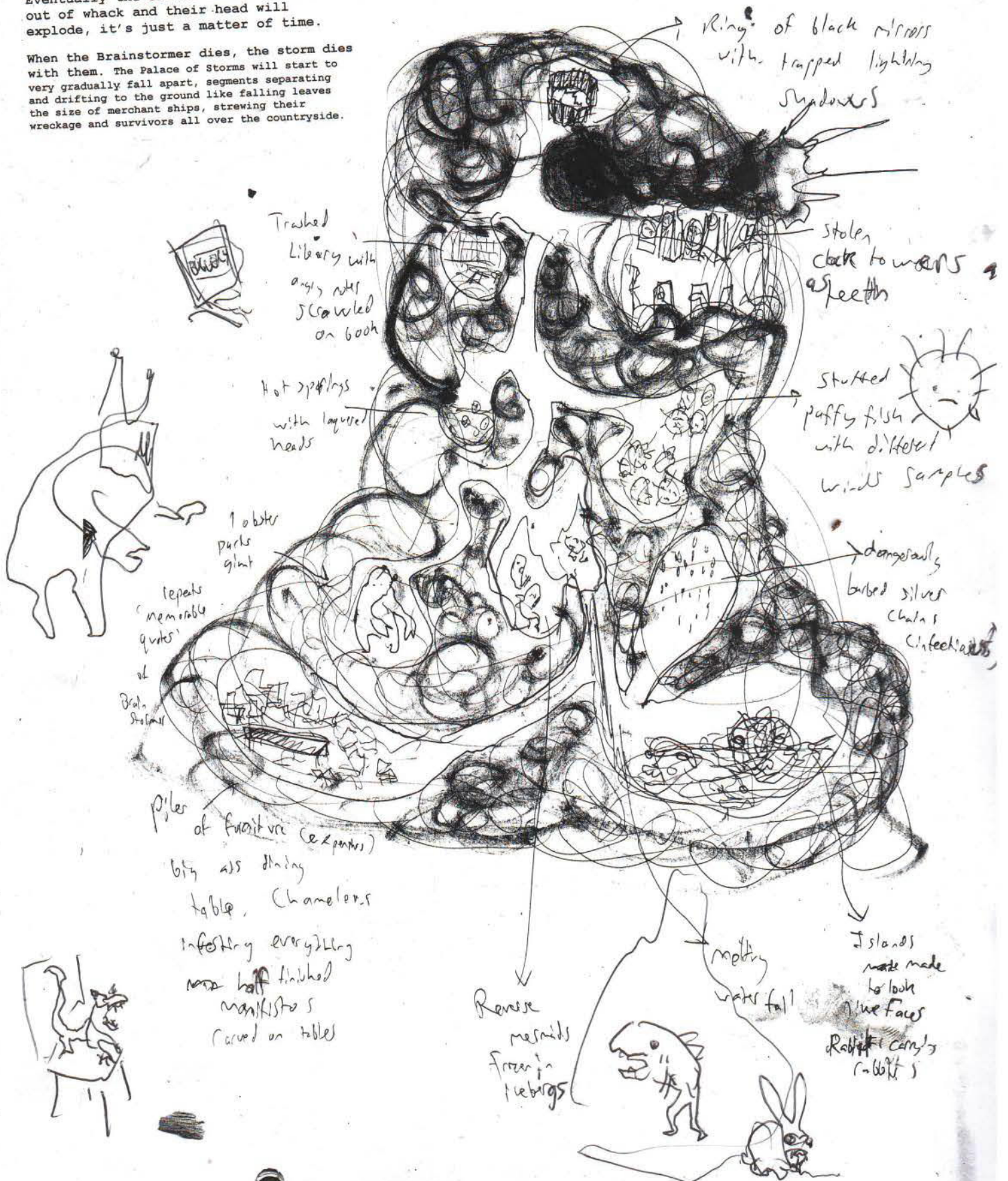
The Hurricane-Palace of the Brainstormer will set off on its journeys. These will be decided by whatever the new Cycloczar thinks their ambition is, or was, or should be. Their minds can be a little confused at this point but general constants are a desire for money, acclaim, sex and the punishment and destruction of those who mocked or degraded them over the long years of squeezing eels for their brine.

The storm will race around, attacking and collecting things. If the Brainstormer wants something, they threaten cities and towns in their godlike voice to prepare it and send down a Tornado to suck it up. These Tornadoes are terrifying and incredibly destructive. If the town or city disobeys, they send down multiple Tornadoes anyway, rain lightning and gigantic hail, tear roofs of houses, drown streets and unleash primordial chaos on the place. Should the target survive the journey, it will be dumped somewhere in the Hurricane-Palace, then forgotten, or not, depending on what is going on at the time. The Storm Palace can end up with an odd collection of money, weird creatures, things that look interesting from above and attractive and somewhat traumatised people.

The Brainstormer is still aware enough to make deals with intelligent creatures, it can offer certain groups transport or safety in return for protection. It can form small storm-golems and lightning-golems to defend itself, though this niggling fine work requires concentration and time.

Eventually the elixir levels will go out of whack and their head will explode, it's just a matter of time.

When the Brainstormer dies, the storm dies with them. The Palace of Storms will start to very gradually fall apart, segments separating and drifting to the ground like falling leaves the size of merchant ships, strewn their wreckage and survivors all over the countryside.



CAPITUALTORS

The Capitulators are lax, a purposeless semi-supernatural race of indifferent thieves and tired spies. They live surrendered lives, abandoning themselves to fate and chance and they are sacred beings to fate itself, organic angels of the absence of directed will.

A Capitulator stands man-high, it wears insectile shape. The eyeless head is split. A pair of living horns? Twitching mandibles upraised in prayer? Sometimes the Capitulator seems a faceless man, masked and helmeted. Sometimes like a beetle rearing up, jaws wide as if to eat the sky. They can stand and walk as men, or run upon all fours like insects would, both are natural to them, both are right. Those jaws close slowly when they fight, but they are strong. They speak, but rarely. When they do so it is in a high pitched whine. Like a fly trapped in a jar of glass.

Capitulators hives look like grey smoke piled in drifts through complex darkened woods. They like shadowed, cimmerian places, dense forest, looming canyons hard to reach. People fear these hives. Once you see Capitulators they are everywhere at once, watching silently. They seem to haunt their hives like ghosts, appearing where no living thing should be. Men come back from there deranged, afraid of things that no-one else can see.

Capitulators ride the eye. Their unique and unstoppable power is that, once directly seen, they can become one with the observers sight, to live inside their vision of the world. They seem, to those whose eyes they ride, like a symptom of insanity. The Capitulator pops up in your visual field, integrated into the scene. If in a room - its in there with you, if you look across a landscape, it is there, close up or far. It can be man-sized in your sight, half hidden by a curtain or a door, or very small. The Capitulator can seem no larger than a bug, an ant on the ground, a fly crawling on the page. It can be so small and so discrete you may think it is gone, but it is not. For as long as the Capitulator rides your eye, it is never out of sight. It can remain there, like a visual ghost, for as long as it so desires. At a moment of its choosing, it is real. The Capitulator is now actual, no longer an illusion or hallucination, it is there, in the room. You may not know this till it reaches out to touch your flesh.

To encounter Capitulators without knowing what they are or what they do is frightening indeed. A disturbing vision that cannot be removed or cured, that signals something in movements and strange signs. It feels like going mad. A specific and irreversible insanity. If you do know what Capitulators are, it's even worse. To know that at any moment and in any place, the Capitulator can be real. That you are never out of danger, never safe so long as you can see. In darkness, or without eyes the Capitulator cannot come, it is trapped inside the lightless eye, but if you see anything at all it can escape.

The Capitulators think they have no self. This is their greatest weakness and the source of their strange power. They submit utterly to fate and chance. They know that everything they do and are is set, no true choice exists, they are machines of flesh and even that small inner voice that says 'I am' is just a ghost of thought, a necessary illusion of the self. Thus so, empty of selfhood, they can be no more than an image in the eye of one observing them. The second they stop believing this the power disappears.

While it persists, they wait. Capitulators never move too quickly, they drift like jaded children of the rich, they amble and they pause. To be seen taking too deep and unconsidered interest in anything, even life itself, is thought quite gauche. Involvement, desperation, admiration, joy, desire, hatred and real need, all these are eschewed. They stand always at one remove from what they do. In speech they speak of what they do in second or third person, names are never used. In truth they do not believe they are real; a Capitulator watches its own reactions like the employment of a complex automatic machine. They are languorous and diffident, superior and hard to motivate or scare.

"... found that, ceasing use of names or personal words, and by confining to abstractions, that I could communicate quite well. I asked about their culture and their hive. (That is, 'I' did not ask at all, an unspecified intelligence made commentary related to the general forms of its construction and their relation to any governmental and societal systems operating within said structure. No name entered my speech and no solid object was described.)

They seemed animated (almost) and replied. (No actual reply was made, a series of relations were analysed in the abstract in the presence of a possible observer, that is: myself). It was difficult to unfold meaning from their words, but it seemed as if the hive, the society and everything inside it was not primarily a living place, but a kind of work of conceptual art. That the purpose of this art was as an ironic commentary, or refutation of, a similar work of art. That is: another hive. That all such societies and ways of life are simply part of a Grand Argument, played out over ages and generations of life. That nothing is what it is, but is a sign or metaphor for something else, which, when found, is also simply a sign or for some still-more-distant thing.

This explains quite well, I think, the preference of the Capitulators for those human organizations and movements which are elaborate, emotionally distant, highly self-aware and very theoretical, and likewise their near-hatred (they never truly 'hate' anything) for ideas and societies that are embodied, unquestioning, passionate and zealous.

Added to this is the fact that if one society of Capitulators acts in a certain way, a different one, observing this, may perform strange and inconsistent actions simply as a comment on the first. What seems to us an anarchy, in which nothing certain of their motives can be known, is, in fact an argument beyond our understanding or our reach.

Our conversation ended when they asked me (in their way) what my own life and society was comment on. The idea baffled me and I was able to issue no reply." - Zenithal

They can be tricked. Sometimes even persuaded or just forced into acting like they have a choice. They do love to gamble and to bet, in the middle of a complex game they can forget themselves and start to care. The moment that they do so their power is gone, they can no longer ride the eye. They spring into reality, observable to all.

Capitulators claim a link to certain other-natural realms. Abstracted from reality as they are by one degree, it may be that they move more easily into those other worlds. They are found often connected to, or employed by, creatures that wield the power of fate and inevitable time.

Capitulators are always slightly bored, they rarely get impatient and almost never scare. If a scheme requires deployment of great energy or drive, they will most likely fail, but if only time and patience are required, and an absence of fear, it is likely they will get it done.

They make effective spies and thieves, capable of living as they do inside the eye. They go everywhere the victim goes and see everything they see. If the sufferer thinks themselves insane, they may simply choose to hide their 'dark hallucination'. Or they can be threatened or controlled in other ways. If the Capitulator stays small and hidden in the sight, the carrier may not fully realise they are there. If undirected Capitulators may still find themselves stealing jewels or works of art in a tired and offhand way. They have a good sense of beauty, but it wakes nothing inside them, abandoned paintings dot the hive.

COLOUR MONSTER

OR PIGMENT EATER

No-one knows for certain exactly what the colour-monster is. Its skin is shaded absent-blank, a tone that cannot be perceived by eyes.

It is probably some kind of lizard, a little like the Chameleon. It could be about the size of a big cat, but bigger somehow, with likely four, or maybe five, lizard-like limbs. They might be monkey-like, with tiny hands. There is certainty about its tail but the curl of the tail is disputed by all.

It scampers quickly and leaps from branch to branch in the forests where it makes its home and flies on prism feathered wings.

It is not white or grey, transparent or invisible. You cannot see through the Colour Monster, you simply cannot see the colour that it is. The sight flinches. The only its bright coccineous eyes, and its wings.

Its wings are very lovely and are made of light. Zenithal has said "the creature, instead of manipulating colour as the Chameleon does, to disguise itself, has learnt to project colour in some raw form, thereby gaining the rare power of flight without the inconvenience of physical propulsion."

When the Colour Monster flies the imperceptible void of its form is haloed in projected rainbow, like light spilling from a painted lantern. Most bold are cardinal and indigo, pyrrous red and ultramarine, but shades of every kind are seen. It is hard to look upon, the wings so bright they nearly blind and the absence of it grousing the orb, but at least it can be found and maybe stopped before it licks your eyes with its sharp tongue.

The Colour Monster eat only extremely colourful things.

Handily, for man the range of living skins makes their flesh less appetising for the Colour Monster, but Lepdoblast remarks: "I have seen it try to pierce an unmarked dull-eyed individual only twice, and on each occasion the only unifying factor was the vibrancy of the victims skin, one being almost coal-black, the other extremely white and pale; of skin tones of the average range the creatures took almost no notice at all. Though those with bright eyes were afraid." If the creatures are swarming and hungry, starved for colour, even the beige greige and brown of human skin may seem appetising to them. And of course, they like to eat eyes, the brighter and more vivid the better."

They do so with their small sharp tongues, which act much like reversed tattoos. They needle-flicker in and out, initially they do not cause much harm. The bleeding is mild but quite difficult to stop as the area around the tongues strike is utterly and permanently drained of colour. It goes the same absent-blank as the Colour Monster, becoming imperceptible to the eye. But then the area goes numb. It will never feel anything ever again. The only way to tell if you are bleeding from a Colour Monster wound is by the warmth and wetness of the blood.

If someone is beset by colour monsters and suffers numerous wounds, the scars will be impossible to see. The visual effect of this on the human body is disconcerting indeed. Areas, sometimes whole limbs, seem not to exist. Body parts do not connect or float oddly in the eye. Disturbing and frightening to look upon, and deeply traumatic for the person involved.

The monsters love to feed from the colours of living eyes, the brighter the better. Should they do so, the result is often blindness. But even if the victim survives and regains their sight, their eyes will now be absent-blank, making them terrifying and strange to look upon.

One or two Colour Monsters can be difficult to deal with. A large swarm can be a serious threat.

The cultural use of the Colour Monster can be more disturbing still. Despite the lack of proof, rumours persist of the existence of deliberately made "Colour Monster-Monsters". Unusually here, Zenithal confirms, and Leptoblast denies, the existence of such things.

Zenithal alleges that tribes of Swamp-Drunks and Bog-Elves will range far from the Melanic Moors to capture Colour Monsters. This done, they return them home, and use them to tattoo a chosen few. This carefully-selected elite are inscribed by touch over a number of months, eventually becoming total absent-blank. They are utterly imperceptible, even to themselves.

Leptoblast decries this utterly: "if every oafish commune that claimed possession of an unseen secret warrior truly did possess one then they would be running into each other by accident all over the moors. And how, may I ask, are such being to be controlled once made? How do they find their way, being unable to see their own feet? It is a nonsense."



(He goes on to decry the fashion amongst the youth of Jukai City for Colour Monster tattoos, calling it "a calamity".)

Nevertheless, popular belief in the existence of the 'Colour Monster-Monster' runs high and rumours or claims of one can be enough to spark a frantic riot as crowds tear homes apart searching for the thing they cannot see.

CORBEAU

Corbeau are blackish green like a deep, dead pond and are feared much more than their limited powers would suggest, especially by men.

They are the size of small women. Each slender limb tapers to a sensitive hoof. Their heads are bare and blank, proportioned like human heads. The black eyes are located half way down the 'face' and difficult to spot from far away. They have no visible organs of sense other than this. The mouth is small and hidden. When eating it extends from below, where the chin would be on a human head. The teeth are small and sharp and the jaw of the Corbeau is not much stronger than a human jaw.

Each has a long elegant whiplike tail which flows in time to the shiftings of their adjustable spine. The chest is round and strong, the waist is very slim and expands to rounded, muscular buttocks and hips.

The Corbeau has muted senses for a hunting beast, its brain is large and it uses this to plan and think ahead and to make use of the single piece of magic which all Corbeau know; its ability to hide within (and duplicate itself from) reflective surfaces. It has one more advantage: a poisoned bite which injects a highly specific toxin into the veins.

Popular imagination regards them as utterly evil, seductive, demonic beings who trick lonely foresters and family men into perverted acts, weaken them with kisses until they are but shells of their former selves, and then consume them. They are feared and hated by all simple folk and regarded by them as virtual (or effectively) devils, either produced by, or in league with, some destructive and demonic power. Witches are held to have Corbeau Familiars, or to change into them.

The Corbeau is also linked in the public mind with the decadence of wealth, they are a 'rich mans plague'. This probably relates to their relationship with mirrors. The only people likely to have mirrors large or clear enough for a Corbeau to move through are those of considerable wealth. There are numerous folk tales in which the innocent bride opens the door that must-never-be-opened in her strange new husbands house and finds inside: a black mirror and a Corbeau nest, in a specially built bedroom made for them, and is then promptly eaten. (This despite the fact that exactly the same peasants will usually report that Corbeau eat only men, usually men they have seduced first.)

Leptoblast eschews the peasant tales and suspicions in a perfunctory way, but in effectively confirms them with his heightened and somewhat purple description of observing a pack of Corbeau by starlight by the side of a melanic pool. (A description so vivid that it lends its name to the famous Sonata by Veridian.) He also claims to have uncovered the original source for the popular Corbeau-In-The-Bedroom story, although, typically, he neglects to mention what or where or who it is.

Zenithal gives a quite different analysis:

"The Corbeau is an entirely innocent, or at least, not evil creature, regarded with fear and dread due to an accident of circumstance and form. Its size, the proportions of its hips and waist, its continual slow movements, the human seeming of its head and the fact that no features can be directly seen, gives no other impression than of being approached by a masked woman on all fours. The effect is quite eerie and whether directly understood, or sensed only in the depths of the mind, explains some of the fear and uncertainty the creature generates, especially in men.

In smaller creatures the poison of the Corbeau bite may be strong enough to kill. In larger ones, the effects are muted. Remarkably, the Corbeau poison does carry a gendered effect. In men it causes apparent physical weakness, passivity, dithering, loss of primal (that is to say, generative) drive and depression. The effects on women (if injected a small dose to be certain) are similar, but much less keenly felt.

The true revelation of the Corbeau bite may be the discovery, by inference, of some generative, impelling fluid or elixir, present in all human beings, but much more so in males, which is suppressed by its venom. If this is the case, then it explains the stories of the creature eating only male beings. Its poison is more effective against them so it may indeed concentrate on hunting them.

As to the final power of the Corbeau, their ability to hide in mirrors and breed new reflected selves within; it is simple to explain.

They are most often found in the forested margins of the Melanic Moors, where the dank gruneous pines loom silently around acidic pools of utter black. The silence of the pools and the stillness of their skins transforms the woods into a mirrored maze, lit darkly by reflected moons. By day the empty sumps are dank and brown with the ever-encroaching roots of the gruneous pines, by night they repeat the sky, perfect observers of the stars. No advantage is more obvious than that of mirrored transit in just such a place. Whether the Corbeau developed this capacity naturally over the long reaches of time, or gained it in some rare and other-natural way, this is the place for them. Their nature and the nature of the land and life in such a place fit each other like a lock and key. As we see elsewhere in nature, creatures either adapt themselves as aptly as they can to their local arrangement of things, or else migrate to lands where they may fitly live.

The Corbeau go where mirrors are, in the absence of mankind these environments are few and far between. By not only constructing artificial mirrors in large numbers, but by abducting Corbeau for our own entertainment, and then bringing the two into close proximity we have unnaturally enlarged its hunting ground.

The mazes of the gruneous pines stretch now into our homes, our parlours, our bedrooms, bathrooms and halls. They do not replicate themselves inside the glass, it is simply that where one has been, others can now freely go. Once a single Corbeau has been reflected in the glass, more can come through. As more come through, they seek out mirrors wherever they go, creating yet more access points.

The resulting plagues and swarms, invading mansions and theatres in the night, crowding into abandoned homes before spilling out into the street, stalking revellers before disappearing as suddenly as they came, can only be prevented when every mirror they have seen has been destroyed."

CRIMSON CONTRARODRON

Eyes a-spin, she rolls rolls in the red rippling waves of crimson petals and reaches out with poorly-ordered hands to mash more poppies into her maw.

The Crimson Contrarodron is the size of a small house and changes colour based on what she eats. She is wise enough to know this and since she wishes to be red, in a field of red flowers so she becomes so as she feasts.

She is invisible now, amidst the red inflorescence, moving with the wind, swaying gently. With a thought she becomes intangible, ghosting through the florets like a gust, or transforms into a red mist that curls and sighs, or she is the flower, or a red sky over a red land, looking down on the tiny figure of a Contrarodron who thinks herself mighty, or a flower, as she crams more poppies into her carnivorous mouth. The red sky laughs quietly to herself to see such a thing and the world shivers under her laughter.

The Crimson Contrarodron is high as fuck pretty much all of the time and ruinously addicted to the poppy seeds fermenting in her belly.

She is a large, fierce, lizard-like predator with asymmetric limbs, gifted with the ability to change her pigmentation based on what she eats. By consuming a small amount of vegetable matter, the Contrarodron can pigment her own skin with the colours of her food. This could help her large form blend in with a wide range of environments.

But she only has one environment.

Leptoblast remarks: "Clearly, most Contrarodrons would have been a mixture of porraceous pigments and sorrel shades, moving smoothly from colour to colour as they crossed from zone to zone. Unknown now as the only remaining examples of their kind are the pathetic and poppy-addicted Crimson Contrarodron."

The Contrarodron has three limbs along her left side and only two along her right. The two front limbs on the odd-limbed side have rudimentary hands, which the Contrarodron can use to manipulate and grasp. Every other limb ends in a tough, large lizard-claw.

Her strange gait may be due to her oddly-arranged limbs or simple chemical dependency. No-one has ever seen the Contrarodron sober so nobody knows. She has speed when she needs, but zig zags a little and loses things.

She has both speech and thought, and claims certain remarkable powers, though, again, no-one is entirely sure if these are powers or qualities the Contrarodron actually has or simply powers she believes she has.

She believes she absorbs a little wisdom of those she gobbles down, and only wishes to eat the wisest, she will engage in conversation before assault, in order to decide who she should eat. These conversations can be quite long and, sometimes, confusing for everyone involved. The Contrarodron believes she gradually grows 'ever wiser' through these consumptions, eventually becoming 'the wisest of all'.

She must answer single riddles, or theoretical questions of her prey before consuming them, should she fail to do so her jaws will lock and her eyes will weep and roll back in her head and she will moan as if going mad. She can still tear someone apart with her strange uneven hands in these cases. However she will not eat the remains.

She has claimed to be descended from an ancient race of titanic beings, or sometimes that she is one of those beings, and will happily discourse at length on eons during which blood rained from the sky, the earth spoke in voices and the sea was a woman who danced for the stars. Again, it is not clear if these are things that actually happened or simply what the Contrarodron believes.

Numerous small cults have sprung up based on these rather dangerous conversations and radical and foolish pilgrims are an important source of protein for Crimson Contrarodron. Though most sages agree, this is not a deliberate feeding tactic, she says the same thing to everyone, and when she thinks no-one is near it says the same things to herself.

Other stated powers include the ability to read minds, to see all as if from the sky, to understand the language of the wind, to occupy all points in her own lifespan at the same time, to cause poppies to grow around her and 'oneness'. Though there is less consistent evidence for any of these abilities and the claims do vary day-to-day.

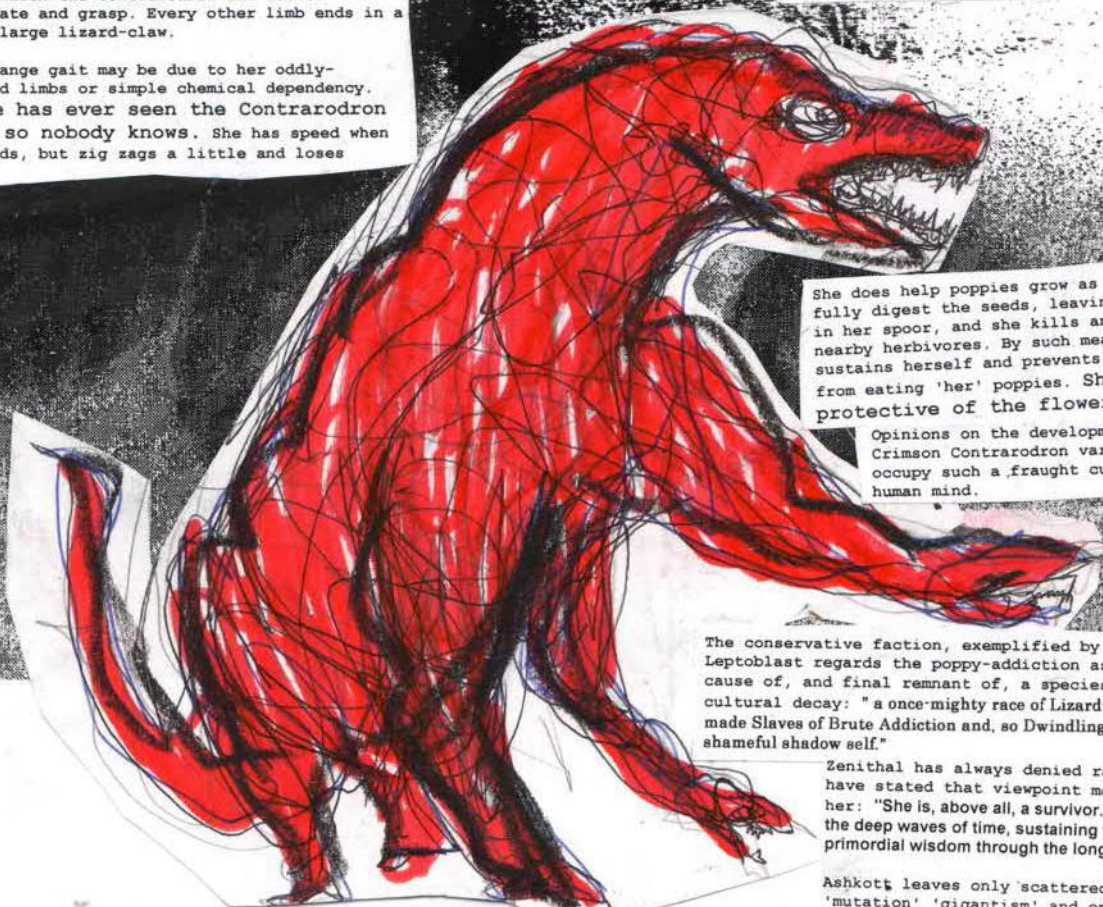
She does help poppies grow as her stomach cannot fully digest the seeds, leaving them everywhere in her spoor, and she kills and eats any large nearby herbivores. By such means she both sustains herself and prevents any other being from eating 'her' poppies. She is jealously protective of the flowers.

Opinions on the development and descent of the Crimson Contrarodron vary wildly, few creatures occupy such a fraught cultural space inside the human mind.

The conservative faction, exemplified by Leptoblast regards the poppy-addiction as the cause of, and final remnant of, a species-wide cultural decay: "a once-mighty race of Lizard-Kings, made Slaves of Brute Addiction and, so Dwindling to a shameful shadow self."

Zenithal has always denied radicalism but few have stated that viewpoint more succinctly than her: "She is, above all, a survivor. Drifting imperishable on the deep waves of time, sustaining who-knows-what primordial wisdom through the long dream of her being."

Ashkott leaves only 'scattered notes about 'mutation' 'gigantism' and one very detailed drawing of the Contrarodrons middle-limb.



CRYPTOSPIDER

This small, intelligent spider is so harmless and weak that it seeks to escape harm by sleeping in your pocket in the day. For this it trades the secrets that it catches in the night.

The Cryptospider is about the size of a big mouse, gold and grey in bands, with blue eyes like tiny shining gems. Its legs are small and thin, projecting not far out. A Cryptospider speaks quite well, its voice is like a tiny flute. It hunts poorly, requiring the aid or protection of some other living thing to survive the rigours of the world. Its one advantage is: its webs can catch forgotten thoughts.

If an intelligent being should accept the Cryptospiders terms, it resides upon their person from then on, curling up in a pocket or somewhere next to the skin. It sleeps through the day, maintaining opposite hours to those of its host. While the host slumbers the spider is awake and while the host is awake, the spider dozes quietly, warm and safe.

Twice a day, on waking in the evening and before it goes to sleep, the spider will politely request food. This can consist of insects, honey, tiny strips of flesh or any combination of the three. On being fed, the spider thanks the host in its small voice, then climbs on to their sleeping head and begins to build its radial pattern web like a halo of silk, expanding in a radial pattern from the host, linked to nearby solid points. The web is softer than a spiders should be, insects can punch right through, and the Cryptospider must grumble in its tiny voice and struggle to repair the holes.

An abandoned idea or misplaced memory may blunder into the web during the night, the Cryptospider will catch it, paralyse it with its bite and wrap it up in silk. When morning comes, the Cryptospider will offer its host all the thoughts it caught that night. Only swallow the squirming silk cocoon, as it dissolves smoothly in the stomach the idea inside will come to mind, as if it had never been lost.

"The mind scabs over many dark events. This engine of forgetting allows us to survive the pain inflicted on us by the world. But, the spider does not know exactly what it catches in the night. Several months after our encounter with the creature in the Yurt, I consumed a Chrysalis and, terrified, leapt to my

feet. I had to be restrained from dashing out into the wilderness. The fear of that moment had returned in one fell swoop, and the dying memory of that terrible event had pressed itself into my mind once more.

If it could be known which cocoons contained bad memories, they could be cast away, (or even used as poison, shocking thought), but it is very hard to discern which is which.

As well as this, I found that the range of tiny indignities done by friends and which are usually quickly forgotten, and the frustrating, detailed chaff of daily life, sprang back into being each morning with full force, making me, I believe, resentful, crabby and detail obsessed.

Regarding the ridiculous 'cover' applications of the Cryptospider, I found myself picking up, more than anything else, the random thoughts of those who slept nearby. Neither they nor I were happy about this.

How often is truly vital or important information idly left aside? I would venture: not at all. Almost by definition one is exposed to random useless nonsense every morning.

Thoughts and memories fly around in the day like mad invisible insects, often returning to their creator at odd moments when the mind is otherwise blank. I personally have found these returning thoughts attend me often while on the toilet, or arrive in a huge swarm just before I fall asleep. The great advantage of the Cryptospider for the Scholar is that, so long as you sleep quietly without a great deal of moving around, somewhere quiet, that is, without rain or driving wind, it is almost impossible to forget anything in your sleep. Even complex abstract information like the code to a lock or the details of a letter have been returned to me with my morning meal.

More notable and less spoken of are the secret advantages of the Cryptospider. My own ideas, of course, may not be the only ones dashing about in the night. (Though frankly I suspect they make up the majority in the local area, the minds of others lacking my unusual cognitive fecundity, (sometimes I suspect that my companions wake up with ideas that certainly should be, must have been, my own...)) These memories and ideas can also be caught up in the Cryptospiders web, and offered to me at breakfast. The Spider, of course, simply catches thoughts, she does not know from whom they come, any more than an ordinary spider questions the genesis of flies.



I have, on some mornings, woken up and realised that the key to a jail cell was in the pocket of an abandoned coat, (most useful information in those circumstances). Once I realised that a letter to the Duke had fallen behind the sideboard, although I woke in a forest with a castle in the distance, and did not know a Duke, or own a sideboard. Once I worked out how to shoe an angry goat, or realised that my guide resented the cut of my cloak.

These memories, or thoughts, can only come from others who have lost them in the night. (Close minds I think, within about five miles.) What was once theirs, was now mine to know. The chances of this happening are quite rare, I estimate perhaps once in every twenty days, but the cumulative effect of these tiny contextless revelations over a breakfast of silk can built up over time and become very useful indeed." - Leptoblast

I did enjoy the spiders company at least, and so long as I paid its (very small) twice-daily fee, I was under no obligation to eat the thoughts it caught for me. But it was very disappointed if I did not eat at least one a day. I felt guilty as the creature did have to watch its careful webbing being destroyed every morning when I woke up, and, as it reminded me: "I do an awful lot of work catching thoughts in the night."

I am now in a complex and difficult social situation, lying to my Spider every morning and pretending to eat my thoughts, while the pile of dry cocoons builds up slowly in my pockets. I am not sure what to do with these memories or how to dispose of them. It seems ridiculous and possibly dangerous to simply throw them away. Perhaps I shall mail them to a relative or friend, let them deal with my chaff if they so wish." - Zenithal

CURSELINGS

Curselings bleed into our world through the shadows of the innocent dead.

They are always there, watching and waiting from inside pools of absence where the light grows dim. They can observe but never touch, though they would like to very much.

First an innocent must die and their shadow, not their corpse, must touch the ground. They can be hung from some rafters or the branches of a tree, or drown in clear shallow water which the light streams through, so long as their body does not touch the earth but leaves a black and clear-edged shadow there. Only then can a Curseling come through the shadow like a door and clamber out.

They are a little taller than men, with long long-angled limbs, three-toed feet and three-fingered hands. Their bodies look like dark brown glass shifting in the shadows of a sunlit room. They are semi-transparent and inside the brown-glass bodies are nearly-black-glass bones to keep them up, and liquid-looking organs at the core. Their living skulls, a little like long-jawed sheep, are more clearly visible than the thin flesh if their almost-goatlike face. Their eyes semi-reflect and flash in the half-dark as they focus and turn.

Only single Curselings can come through each shadow cast. They are careful, never coming when in view, always awaiting silence and averted eyes before they make their move. Should one Curseling cause an innocent to die, and bring another through, the second will obey the first. This is the only rule or hierarchy they respect, but Curselings do respect it, if one brings through another, the other will be loyal, and so great pyramids and chains of them can come to be, each ultimately owing fealty to a single shadow-thane. This is how Curselings grow in power, each seeks to bring as many as they can.

Riddles, gold, murder and the lost are all things Curselings love.

They will sit riddling in the darkness for hours, whispering voices passing back and forth. Curseling riddles rarely have a happy end;

I am your child
made of your flesh
another helped
they entered you
I spit but eat your time.

A wound.

I am a bond
you won't seek to loosen.
I make of you
a prison
you hope won't be escaped.
What should go freely
I prevent.
but I, a painful visitor
come almost-too-late every time.

A tourniquet.

Riddling is one sure way to distract a Curseling, they cannot leave one unanswered. You may count your life as safe so long as you can match them tongue-to-tongue.

Lost things they also know, some sense leads them to things that no-one else can find. Lost people, objects, lands and paths, they seek and find them all. And pass, if not invisible then certainly unseen.

They love abandoned treasure and they know its place. The long leagues of watching from the dark have given them the routes to hidden hoards, un-guarded, lost to all, placed in secret rooms or caverns deep beneath the earth. Totally unknown to any who live. They love these secret hoards and travel there to lair within. Here the shadow-birth Curse-Lords make their thrones and sit amidst the fabled glories of a final age, luxuriating in the loneliness and the wealth. Sometimes they skip spontaneously through the dusty tracks, leaving three-toed prints where nothing else has tread.

It is well that they do, for it keeps them far from the affairs of men. Murder, Curselings also love.

A man dying alone, face down in a ditch is a sight they like to witness. A woman wandering a mountain without friends, caught in a storm and freezing to death, they hunger to observe. Not far are their hearts from thoughts of sorrow or loss. Always they adore isolation, the wanderer or exiled things. Not for its own self, but for the long slow drawn out sorrows of its doom, which they will eat from its skull just before its death, pulling it out in silver strands and gulping it down.

And so the exile and lone wanderer should dearly fear their dark attentions touch. Curselings are clever, cunning, tireless and nearly invisible in the dark. Sharp mimics of the voice, they will use their wits to break up groups, luring them in different directions, hiding their path or moving things around to baffle the mind.

To see enemies happen each upon the others sight, surprised into sudden violence, amuses them and they will bait opposing groups until they meet. Violence thins the numbers and perhaps a lone survivor will be lost who they may tease and torment to a ruinous end.

If captured, a Curseling will often try to bargain for its life. They will promise access to the hidden hoard wherein they dwell. A bargain most unwise to make, but many do. The hoard and its dwelling place are real as winter ice; the Curselings word is not. Their souls are scribed in water and they have less honesty than Crows. Many things occur on such a path, long as it is, gold heralds many jealousies and fears.

If gold does not tempt its captors, a Curseling may pledge other things. All have something they have lost, something they would wish returned or something they desire and cannot find. And certainly Curselings can find these things; they can find anything un-found if given time.

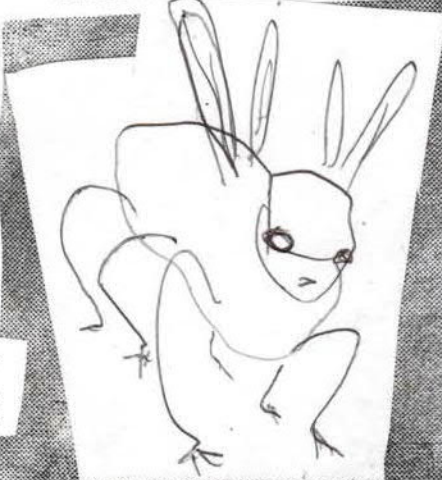
Some very foolish people seek to hunt a Curseling or even bring one through themselves, so desperate are they for this un-found thing. That path is dark, and ends not well.

DISCRETION BUGS "THE CONSIDERATE ONES" "THOSE WHO KNOW" "DRAGON-FLYS"

"Words From The Worm" is a popular term to describe a thing nobly said or particularly well spoken, though the bugs are not much like worms at all, and would resent the name.

The average Discretion Bug is about a finger-length long. The head at the end is round, the size and volume of a finger from the cuticle to the tip. If it landed neatly just before your knuckle starts and kept very still on your hand, it might be seen as an accessory, and in fact they are a well regarded subject for the jewellers art. The Discretion Bug is associated always with culture of the most refined kind.

They come coloured widely, in iridescent variety, spanning the whole spectrum, from gleaming gunmetal melanic, atros and piceous to silvery leucochoric white, and every colour in between. Each particular bug comes one colour only, though they vary tremendously in tone. The papery substance of their wings is pale with capillary filigree. The head and joint where the thorax meets the wing is of the deepest, darkest shade.



friends with a Discretion Bug, this is usually indicative either of their good character, or hidden noble birth. The Bug generally gifts them with a certain ring or locket which plays an important yet unexpected part in the stories denouement. The villain of the story sometimes tries to rob the Discretion Bugs lair, and does so, gloating obscenely over its tiny granular treasures which they hold in the palm of their rough hands. Something terrible usually happens to this person at the end of the tale. Blinding by alkali spit and falling into a bear trap are favourite finishers.

One of the oddest things about The Considerate Ones is that they all claim to act as dragon-analogues to a race of tiny intelligent mantids. This leads them to prefer the name 'Dragon Flies'. Though they are not 'Dragonflies'.

The Considerate Ones love conversation and speak well. They treasure civilised companions, the dirty, boorish and poorly educated are quietly shunned. Should you fail to meet their standards they will tolerate you briefly, make their excuses and leave. A sense of propriety, discretion, compassion and social awareness is necessary to remain friends, they rarely express offence, but are easily offended none the less. If the Bug respects you, it's warmth and discretion know no bounds. It will ask a great many personal questions (apologising for its impertinence), but only so it may know, understand and like you better in the short time it has left. They survive for only five or so years, which they consider to be a 'Great Eon'.

The Bugs love to both deliver and receive small gifts to and from their friends. They curate and collect very very small, but perfect, treasures. The nest of a Discretion Bug is a tiny woven palace of arulent and luteous knots, lit by reflected light from barely perceptible gems. Sometimes they have scraps of silk, pieces of illuminated manuscript, fragments of incense or even 'large' objects like rings, keys, lockets or coins. The bugs have excellent taste and can correctly value gems, coins or works of art quite exactly so long as they are not much bigger than the bug itself. Each thing they own has a particular history which they will be happy to relate to you.

They love sugar and protein and like to hunt live prey. Usually smaller insects or very very tiny mammals. Raw meat is acceptable if neatly prepared. They have never heard of sushi but would probably like it.

In many circles, having converse with these creatures is considered a sign of breeding and good character. It has become a fashion in some aristocracies to have your children raised around Discretion Bugs. This rarely goes well. The Bugs are impossible to breed in captivity and so hunters or 'collectors' must be paid exorbitant fees in order to 'acquire' them in the wild. This occupation is frowned upon by society, but very well paid. In addition to this, children are generally horrid and neither they, nor the Discretion Bugs enjoy each others company. The more respected of the ancient kings are said to have had ambassadorial Bugs and very old, pretentious or ambitious coats-of-arms may have them in their shield or sign.

There are numerous fairy tales in which the hero or heroine wanders in the wilderness and makes

As the bugs relate it, they regard the micro-mantic-men as their natural prey, they consume them and steal their tiny treasures, then swoop off and collect the pin-head jewels and micro-bullion in a pile on which they sleep. At intervals mantis-man knights seek out these lairs and do battle with the Bug, seeking to steal back these hordes and destroy their oppressors. The Bugs claim that in the boles of the deepest trees there are ancient Bugs 'Ten, or even Twenty years old, the size of bats, or even cats!' and that they sleep on hordes of gold almost as heavy as a purse of coins.

No-one has ever been able to find evidence of this civilisation of mantis-men or their generations-long conflict with the Bugs. Questioning this story always results in deeply offending the bug in question.

Each bug can spit out a tiny gob of alkali slime which does about as much damage as a needle entering the skin and then expands into an area of poisonous gas up to four inches across. If you do try to steal their treasure, there is no magical or supernatural response, but the bug will flip out and try to blind you with its spit. If it escapes it will ruin your reputation for miles around.

DISGUSTAPOID or WAILVIATHAN

Its coming is rare, but feared by all.

The Disgustapoid is made (somehow) or comes to be, only amidst the Beasts of Shame. Some say they are a rare mutation born to the Beasts, others a religious or magical figure summoned into being by them.

Others still claim they are spontaneous generation from the bile-pits of the Beasts, where they dump their refuse and faeces, that the Weepviathan emerges head first, rising slowly and blindly out of the corrupted ooze. It is not difficult to believe.

Whatever their origin, the Beasts always treat the Disgustapoid as a cherished and loved shamanic figure. They feed it and tend to it until it is ready to begin its Pilgrimage of Screams.

The creatures themselves look a little like the Beast of Shame. They have skin of varying colours and balding irregular patches of grey-black fur. Usually they are covered in grime and unwashed filth.

They have the same round black mouths as the Beasts and the same pointed teeth. They have only one eye and three limbs with no hands. Even when fully grown the Disgustapoid finds it difficult to walk, it stumbles forward with its head waving madly in a strange pattern caused by its awkward gait. Half the time it falls over and just rolls wailing on the ground till it can get back up. A deep low moan that sounds like a huge engine about to fail comes intermittently from its mouth.

If it was not tended by the Beasts then it would probably starve to death quite quickly, so clearly unsuited to world it is. Yet it has a will to live. If cared for it can grow to eighteen feet in height.

The greatest danger of the Weepviathan is its gaze. Anything living that it looks at starts screaming, goes into shock, and dies of a heart attack.

It is never difficult to find the creature. It is surrounded by the screams of dying birds and the thumps as flocks fall to the ground en-masse. The beasts of the field fare no better, foxes, oxes, rabbits and dogs, lions and leopards, snakes and marmosets. Even animals thought not to have a voice, will scream and die as it looks upon them. Monsters are not immune, neither is man. Only the Shameful Beasts survive its attention. (Very rarely, exceptionally tough creatures have simply gone into shock and been merely heavily and permanently traumatised.)

It has been supposed that the internal state of the Disgustapoid is so powerful that some aspects of life simply cannot exist within its gaze. That anything it looks at sees itself, from the outside, as the Wailviathan sees it. That the primal horror of this causes the heart to stop and the mind to retreat into coma.



When the creature has reached its full growth it will begin its pilgrimage. The Beasts will take it on a great journey that brings them through all the most beautiful sights they know. The

Wailviathan looks at them and moans, anything living there dies.

The Beasts are no more aggressive than usual, but they will fight to the death to defend the Wailviathan from assault

No-one knows exactly where the pilgrimage is intended to end. In every known case so far, something has killed the Wailviathan and all of its attending Beasts. This has been accomplished by waiting until the procession is inside a large forest, then setting the forest on fire from every direction, by leaving a trail of artworks to a nearby cave, then blocking it up with the Wailviathan inside, and by numerous other strange and diverse methods

The rewards for ending a Pilgrimage of Screams are high.



DREAMONS or SUMMERLINGS

These bright beings visit a rare few in dreams, and trade in certain objects for great acts.

They come first when you are asleep, and in need. You find yourself surrounded by a summer sky. Vast angle-spanning pillars and revetments of cloud. Like the piled layers of storms, but more peaceful, higher and deeper than any storm could ever be with no ceiling to their reach and no ground below. Lit in the low long light of a fading summer, the rich red sun that draws long shadows on the ground at end of day. And the many colours, vermillion and crimson, cornflower and petal-pink, more like the shades of flowers than of clouds.

The Dreamons are there. They are tall, and bright, like that place. There are several all around you but they speak as one. Their arms are sleeved in feathers, their heads wear iridescent helms and the rest of them is shifting scales that shine like beetle shells. The feathers on their arms are strong, thick and stiff like the flight feathers of eagles, but bright. The plates of its body seem like armour, perhaps they are. But there are hundreds, thin, and delicate, like china-ware, none identical, all neatly shaped to fit and slide. What armourer would build like this? and in such colours? The rippling pigments of the feathers and plates are precisely counterpoised.

The head is hidden in a kind of mask or helm. Each holds its own identity. It looks like metal plates have been bent around the head and joined together with a seam down the centre of the front. There are lenses in the mask and these can also vary in their shade. The metal of the helm is like that of the armour plates, iridescent, shifting like spilt oil under the light, with weaves and snakes of metal running through. Behind their heads, the Dreamons have a spray of feathers, radiating like a peacocks tail.

When they come to you in dreams, they do not yet have the black spikes that can lodge them in this world.

They will make you an offer. A thing for a thing. The item that you seek must be solid and specific, with a particular relationship in the world. So "a Key" is not acceptable, but "The Key that opens the ivory door in the magicians library" is. You do not need to know where it is, or even what it looks like, but you must know exactly what it is. It must be easy to hold in one hand. It must be made from natural materials, not difficult to arrange since almost everything in the world is, but very magical items sometimes cannot be retrieved. If you agree, the Dreamon will simply hand you the item. You wake up holding it.

In return they will want something from you, something you must go and get. They will tell you what it is. These things vary enormously, but they have some qualities in common. Like the item you received, they are easy to hold in one hand. They are highly specific, very beautiful, natural objects, always the most perfect and sublime. They are never manufactured things, but are sometimes worked inside them, like a pearl in a crown, a bird in a cage, a leaf pressed in a book. When this is the case, the Dreamons always want the natural thing without the manufactured cage around it, the pearl, not the crown, the bird, not the cage, the leaf without the book.

It will be in a very particular place, and often a particular time. A bird freed from a cage in the palace of a king. A stone carved into loops beneath a waterfall. A spiders web from the library of an undead Thing. A moon-moth landing on a petal in a monsters lair at a certain moment in a certain night. These are typical Summerling quests. Strange things, with dreamlike logic and life and death bound together in the deed. Simple objects, in very very dangerous conditions.

If you retrieve this thing, and sleep with it in your hand, the Summerlings will be satisfied, and go. You will wake up with it gone. If you do not, they will be angry.

The Dreamons want things from this world they may not take themselves. They can move items around, but this creates a debt. To pay the debt, something must be taken out, or someone us be found to take it on. You must retrieve what you have said you will find. If you do not, they will come for you.

The Dreamons can move a single small object each night and leave it in the hands of a sleeping individual. If you anger them they will use this power to confound you, either taking things of value to you and giving them to your enemies, delivering cursed objects to your hands or leaving you with other peoples valued property. They may even make vital objects of your own the condition of a quest for some other person or group. Desperate bands of ner-do-wells can turn up demanding the hilt of your sword or the cloak from your back, your hair, or an eye.

When a Dreamon comes through into this world, its form is different in two ways. It has angled black metallic spikes sprouting in rows from both of its arms. These do not look like natural growths. It carries behind it like a tear in space, a vision of its world. This can only be viewed from directly in front of the Summerling. Behind it, like a halo, is a view of that cloud-strewn, depthless sunlit skyscape where winter never comes. They walk slowly here, dragging the other world behind them.

They will try to take you and pull you through into their world. You cannot survive there, your flesh will burn with the fire of dreams and you will fissure into multi-coloured ash, ash that joins the architected cloud.

If the black metallic antennae are damaged or removed, the tear between their world and ours can fluctuate alarmingly, anyone near can be pulled in.

DUMBSMOKE or SPAZZ GAS

An intangible golem of stupidity, the Dumb smoke is a patch of brightness in the world. Composed of little rainbow-spectra droplets, the view through it is reality as seen by children and fools. Much of the detail is removed. The chains of cause fray at their links, seconds lose their division, hours melt into days, tomorrows die and times horizon tightens round the eyes. Scale is lessened, the world is shorter now, infinity is almost within grasp. Colours are brighter, fewer and more bold. People conform more closely to their type. Stage magic looks like real magic. Statements spoken though the smoke are simpler and stupider. Music in the mist is less artful and complex.

Dumb smoke has a face and limbs. The face is flat with a gaping mouth, large blank eyes and little else. Its limbs are little curls of wreaths of smoke that it forms and then forgets about, leaving them drifting in the air and chasing it as it moves on.

The Dumb smoke prism's stupidity into a burning tear of primary shades, nothing may enter and emerge un-dumb. The effect ebbs away into the general zone around the smoke, making it hard to form or execute complex plans.

There is a secret rite, hunted by a few, which distils the dumbness from a human mind. It is banned by all authority and abjured in every civilisation known. Those who seek the Rite of Thought, believe this rule is made to protect the lazy and corrupt. That what the world fears most is thought, and to free the mind from stupidity is to birth a race of hyper-beings. People free from fear and rage, superstition and racial contempt. Super-citizens who, once created through the Rite, will throw off the shackles of corruption and ancient fear, issuing in a perfect world. But the Rite is complex, hidden and hard to find, and anyone caught seeking it is killed.

Should they succeed, in every case thus far, the results of the Rite of Thought have been a cavern full of cultists with severe mental problems, detail-obsessed to the point of total social withdrawal and incapable of communicating in any way, and a patch of living Dumb smoke hanging in the air.

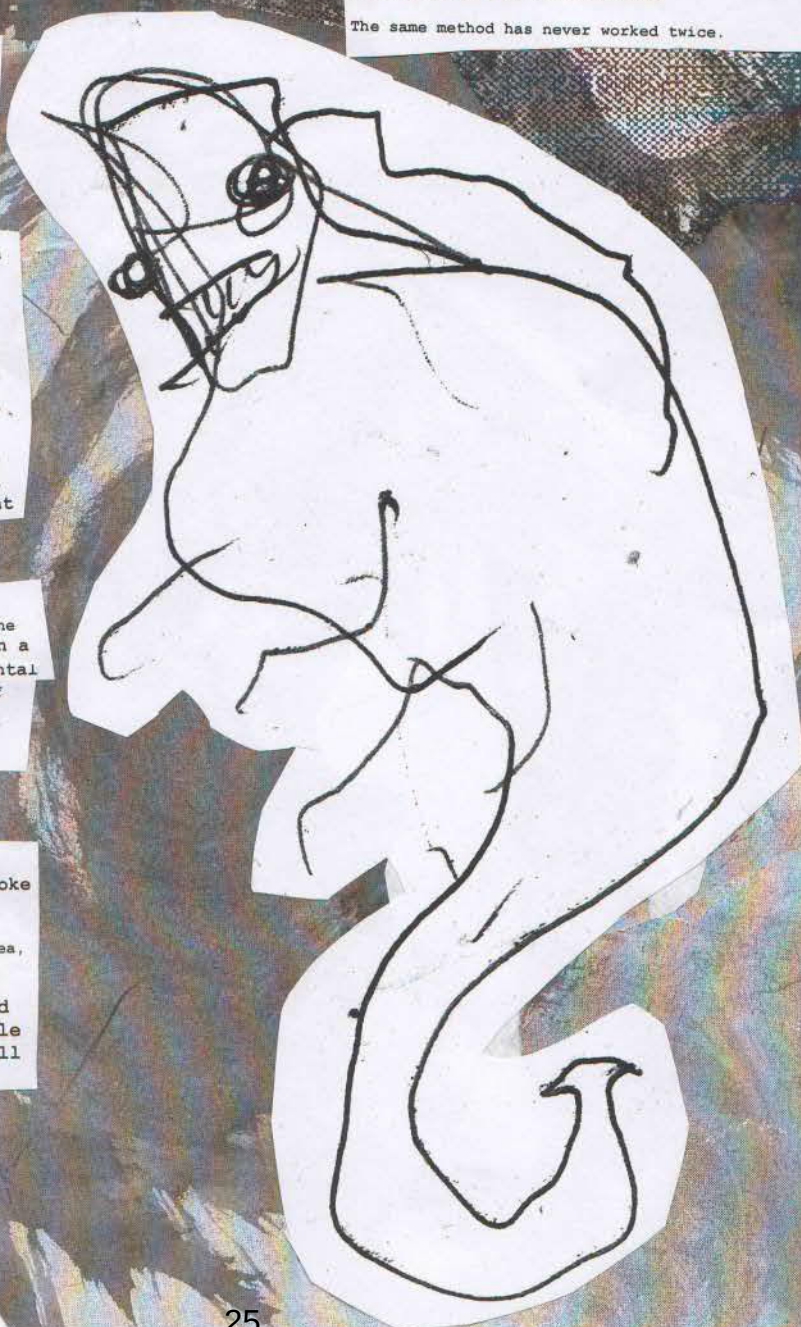
It is a necessary waste product of the Rite, composed of pure distilled stupidity. Dumb smoke is unbelievably hard to destroy or control. Fire evaporates it, but this can simply spread the moronic gas over a wider area, and the smoke itself will re-congeal in time. One or two have been tricked into bottles and air-tight rooms. And any scheme designed to deal with it must be one executable by idiots, because anyone near it will be dumb until they get away.

The Dumb smoke does not understand enough to be deliberately dangerous to man. In fact it half-understands everything said to it, no matter how complex or in what language. If you told it to 'drop the ball' in the common tongue, it would throw the ball. If you told it 'analyse the orbit of the moon' in the tongue of the ancient lizardmen, it would analyse the cubit of a spoon. It always grasps just enough to catastrophically screw something up, and no more. Generally it wanders aimlessly around, feared and avoided by all except holy fools. It likes active living things and will float towards them, trying to interact.

The greatest threat is if the Dumb smoke moves, unobserved, into an urban populated zone. Cities have emptied overnight to escape its caress.

Various irregular adventuring bands have been tasked with battling the dumb smoke, with borderline success. Often the best that can be done is to somehow lure it out into the wilderness and then run away very fast. Some have been bottled. One group claimed that by going back in time they managed to prevent the creation of a dumb smoke that had retarded the entire aristocracy of a small kingdom during a royal wedding. Since they had no evidence of this they were jailed for insubordination, but quickly escaped by unknown means.

The same method has never worked twice.



ECLIPSE-LICH

The stars in the sky range in size, some as small as watermelons, others as large as affordable homes. This can be seen by examining their iron remains. But we must not let its metal corpse bemuse us as to the significance of a star. Stars are the engines of fate and torn from this purpose, like the wheel of a mill blindly grinding without corn they can be monstrous indeed. And a star, dead and brought back to life, can possess a very terrifying mind, a meteor falling without end, for it passes through its own despair, a journey without limit, boundary or time. We see the echo of its fall but do not understand that everything it does is like the scream of someone plummeting into a river from a bridge, self-murdered, a fall within a fall.

Should a star die out of time, or be broken from its sphere by fearful trial or the vengeance of the rest, it falls in wrath. These bad stars seem to aim for life, hurling into cities, poisoning the earth like venom'd blades. Calling as they fall, to those who share their pain: A high position, betrayal and a fall, then black and endless rage. Inculcating visions and demands into their dreams and waking fugues.

A dark pilgrimage begins, slowly, from many places, those called begin their trek towards the fallen star. When those who serve the star discover it, they hoist it from the earth. They bathe the star in fire and stolen blood. For years, perhaps for centuries. If it consumes enough, it burns and breaks once more into a hideous mockery of celestial fire. An undead star casting an undying light. The Eclipse-Lich.

The star-mortar stands on four black legs and arms have been created for it to manipulate the world. Thin, spindly limbs puppeted by a disgusted hand. Like an imprisoned aristocrat would, grimacing, pick up and wield a grimy doll, the Eclipse-Lich so submits to grasp and hold, to move at all. From one who never moved but turned the earth beneath their gaze, ordering it as they would, now they must crawl and work and do, like broken living things, the slaves of time.

An urn, huge, squat, lead, black with soot and black again beneath, the star-mortar issues fire. The star is roaring deep inside and all that can be seen of it is smoke and flame, a great light, flickering blood-red and white. The tongue of fire that leaps forth is the flame that wraps meteors as they fall, the tail that springs from comets, as if the star inside the urn was falling still.

Above the mortar's mouth, radiate six black rays that seem to hover in the air like the diadem of an invisible crown worn by a featureless monarch of fire. The rays are made of no substance known to man, pure black, absorbing any heat or light. They stand clearly in the comet-fire emerging from the urn. These are the corpse-rays of the undead star, it wore them once in life during its transit through the nightly sky. In death they are reversed, yet still signify celestial rank. Those stars once mighty in their kind have greater rays and more.

These rays reflect through space and all possible time. True stars use their rays to unlock fates for living beings, to work the machinery of time and let change and life occur. The Eclipsor cares no more for life; it makes its rays bind servants to its will. Each black ray is a prison-gate; any single living being it sees may be entrapped. They are reduced to black reflections in the burning glass, the ray brings forth a dark new being, an anti-self, with every power enhanced, reversed and utterly under its command. These creatures are the captains of the Eclipsor. They can be killed, but can be re-born from the black ray at any time with ease. The only true defeat they know is for the ray to be seized from the fiery crown and smashed.

The powers of the Eclipsor are the dark opposite of the fate-bound stars and life-sustaining sun. Chaos, death and living-death. At night it issues forth a false dawn of fire which will cause the angry dead to rise and walk. As the true sun rises, the Eclipse-Lich sends forth in rage, its fuliginous rays, burning blackly, blotting out the sunlight where it can. This is how we know its closeness, as you near the Eclipse-Lich, or it is nearing

you, a dark bite is taken from the sun. As you sink into the zone of its control, the blot gets bigger, eventually creating a full and false eclipse that darks the land. When true night falls, the sky turns red and the dead walk. Darkness upon darkness without end. The greater its rays, the wider is the range of its control, each ray bestows a rough radius of a mile.

Its long sojourn in the sky and its memory of the conversation with the stars means the Eclipsor recalls much of the fates of nations and of men. It is the duty of the stars to signal change and make the space in time for great events. They watch us constantly, counting out the minutes and the years, calmly marking time and making ready for each subtle change, and large.

The Eclipsor is plunged into the centre of an epic tale they half-already know. They understand the future and the past, not perfectly, but like a half-remembered dream. Now free from duty to the celestial sphere, they use this knowledge for their own design. The death of life. The destruction and consumption of the sun, to feed upon it utterly and then replace it in the sky, becoming a black-red undead sun over a world made dark.

EEL AMARANTHINE

Despite its dark looks, dark habits, dark reputation and magical powers of regrowth, the Eel Amaranthine is not especially evil. They rarely hunt man, preferring smaller prey, though they will if desperate or if they have the numbers. Neither are they especially malicious in their hunting behaviour, merely ruthless.

The Eel Amaranthine is a centripetal amphibian eel which both swims and walks easily on the land. They dash and splatter madly, racing in and out of the dark water where they live, twisting themselves in complex knots, weaving around terrain, climbing things then running off.

They are scaled a deep, dark purple-red, some scales are nearly black. Each has a dorsal frill running its body-length. This stays laid flat along the spine until aroused or under threat, then the frill lifts up and reveals itself as a blood-bright arterial-warning red. Its eyes are huge pupilless ochroleucous orbs that seem to glow. Even more disturbing, as the Eel always seems to be smiling at everything and the combination of this with its aggression lends it a fearful aspect.

The skull of the Eel Amaranthine is about the size of a mountain cat; it is the disposition of its jaw that makes it seem to smile. Its eyes emit no light, it is a sensory illusion caused by the blue-grey sight of night and the shine of reflected stars.

Most have around eight sets of claws, running evenly down their length which give them excellent short bursts of speed through the thick knots of ruined stone, black entanglements and sad gruneous trees that rim the mirror-flat pools where they reside. They lack stamina and will usually fail over a long chase. But rarely require one.

The length of the Eel can differ according to the individual, reasonably sized specimens have been found from six to seven feet long. 'Young' Eels are shorter. There is no technical upper, or even lower, limit to their span and there are, of course, wild tales of mile-long eels told by swamp-drunks round the guttering smoke of peat fires in the dark autumn eves.

The Eels are nocturnal and like to spend the day curled up in a bog-hole or drifting asleep under the surface, but they can wake up, and become active, very very quickly indeed. At night they come out to play. The Eels Amaranthine like still, stagnant water and are not subdued by the cold, preferring long dark twilights. The darker and more silent and more still the evening is the more excited they become.

In the black pools of the Melanic Moors they are often the only things moving, leaping and gambolling, churning out of the water and racing through it in groups. Combined with its eyes and its smile the effect is sinister indeed.

An Eel Amaranthine is about as smart as an ape, they learn quickly and can solve puzzles. If well-trained they can be highly effective pets and guards. They are tricky though, and difficult to make loyal.

Leptoblast rages repeatedly against the swamp drunks of the Melanic Moors in his account of that area and blames them largely for the catastrophic failure of his expedition and his subsequent bankruptcy after his backers brought suit for the excessive drowning of hounds.

The one thing everybody knows about the Eel Amaranthine: they grow back. If an Eel is sliced in half across its middle, each half will slowly generate the parts it needs to become whole. They will not grow any longer, a six foot eel will simply become two three foot eels, but one half will generate a head and the other a tail and they will both continue on. Ashkott himself gave up his Eel anatomy investigations in disgust after they resulted in "nothing more than an unnecessary multiplication of my stores of eels."

It is unknown if they truly breed in any way or simply suffer harm and then grow back. There may once have been only a single Eel Amaranthine in the world and perhaps all Eels are simply reflections of the Amaranthine Eel.

In popular thought the Amaranthine Eel is associated with death and believed in some way to have death as a patron. Their behaviour certainly lives up to the expectation, and as well as their regenerative capacity, the Eels do seem to like the symbols and moods of ruin and doom. They are happy to writhe around skeletons and skulls, black leafless trees or broken statues. They like abandoned places and homes and castles in decay. Grunelings 'Potemkin Village With Eels' is rightly acclaimed as a hypnagogic masterpiece, we must hope it is recovered soon.

The villain in plays and stories will often have an Eel Amaranthine as a pet and everyone knows the children's rhyme:

"Mother shouts
and Father shoves
but look out for
the Eel-skin gloves!"

EOJIAN WYRM

We do not know its origin and the rumours of its birth cannot be held in words. Carved in temple walls, looked in soundless dances repeated over time, in shard-like statues and metaphorical tales we find the legends of the Wyrms. Every culture has a different view. To some it is the wrath of fate, the signal of destruction and unavoidable death, the raptor-polis which can wipe a city from the earth as simply as a hawk seizes prey from the flock. To others, a grim messiah, intercessor between the gods and man, the ward of the Apocalypse, fierce angel, tetra-aegis, the Serpent That Poisons Death, battling abominations, monsters and daemons of all kinds.

It must come from the first order of created things, from the dark heart of time before it beat to life and from the still blood there, cool in its great chambers where it waits. Before the world, before the sun, while stars paused in their birth. Before the light divided from the dark. Betrayed. Imprisoned, chained in silent bonds, a fastness outside the order of comprehensible things: a prison without syntax or time that words cannot describe. Tortured to the point of destruction by those powers that think no thing should ever be.

Then, escape. Refuge in a wild and insignificant archipelago of time and space, an unconsidered corsair-world in a lawless reality. That is: our world. Here it found great darkness and from this built its broken shape.

It gnawed darkness from the deeps of the sky. Wherever it bit and tore, through flowed the golden light. But the dark disappears at the end of each day's night and flows into the deeps of the ocean and the depths of space and slowly breeds and grows, it creeps back into the sky, lengthening each night again. So the battle between the Wyrms and the Night goes on, ebbing in regular time. Each year the Wyrms grow stronger and consumes a little more, in the winter it grows weaker and the dark expands.

It takes these shards of dark and makes from them its twisted form. From its tangled self-assembled shape we know its inner madness. They are a mighty armour still. But the Wyrms battles constantly, and its shield must be renewed. Some of these conflicts have been seen and recorded by mankind; against the behemoths of the land, or unearthly creatures that come from the beyond. But even when there is no challenge on the earth or in the empty sky, the Wyrms descends to the unseen deeps and battles what it finds.

The Wyrms is a fearful thing and it preys upon us at its pleasure, but it may be only through its constant war against the dark that we survive at all.

Its size seems to differ with the time, the age, the season and the years. It is most commonly at least a mile in length, and the width of a fat whale, though it often looks longer. When it climbs mountains and flies into the air to gnaw upon the night, in the distance it can seem to reach between the land and sky like a curling black thread. And its width is jagged and irregular; each fragment is composed of a different type of dark, torn from different places at different times. Some blurred with half-veiled stars, some thick with oceanic gloom, some almost-grey with storm and some a pulsing hot tectonic dark from beneath the mountains root.

The shards of the Wyrms are sharp, they slice through tides and grind through stone. The Wyrms curls through the land, the sea or sky much as a sea serpent loops through the waves. Though it does require a moment in which to make the leap between the land and sky, or between the soil and stone.

The Wyrms fights titans. The greatest of the mighty beasts, colossi, huge beyond compare, the valley gougers and the lifters of hills. The breed of hell it also fights, any daemon that appears on earth in form of challenging size may face its coiling dark. And it combats also those inexplicable and indescribable unnatural things that come from beyond and which can never be fully known.

If creature of gigantic puissance arrives upon the earth, whose purpose or nature is the destruction of the world or of the reality which binds it up, then the Wyrms will come. It has saved the life of the world uncountable times over the Eons.

The Wyrms preys upon mankind whenever it wills. It sinks ships, devours towns from below and has attacked and destroyed cities, nations and Empires in the whole. It may have wiped out whole civilisations. If it has, no memory of them persists.

Some think, or hope, that the Eojian Wyrms preys upon man only when we threaten the World that sustains us. And there are times when this seems to be the case. But often not. Sometimes the target of the Wyrms seems random, insignificant or simply one of whim. It is a Serpent still and, though it protects this world, it may have little sympathy for any of the particular species on it. No-one knows its opinion or fully understands its will.

The Wyrms has been battled by man. It has never been defeated. No-one knows what danger victory would bring in such a case, though the brave say that if mankind can defeat the Wyrms, we prove ourselves able protectors of the world, and will no longer require it.

Nevertheless, legends claim it has been tricked, persuaded or guided away from its chosen prey on a number of occasions, mainly through courage and guile.

FLAMMEOUS LADS



Flammeous lads crusted and crippled horribly by transit through the fire. They leap out from its heart, cruel and ready for mischief.

They can be summoned simply with strings of words, transmitted orally and never written down, exchanged in the backs of bars, drug-den crannies or lamp-lit libraries in the middle of the night.

For the summons, blood of innocents is spilled and poured into the heart of a fire. The words, the blood, the blaze and they will come. The more blood and the larger grows the fire: the more boys torrent forth. ("The burnt blood must come from one heart only, thank the gods, which limits the legions of lads". - L)

As each lad leaps forth, little by little the life in the fire dies down. The first are burnt bright red, still raw and smoking. They are vibrant strong and lively, climbers and leapers, biters and batterers. As the flames lick lower in the grate, the lads turn cinereous, grey and caked with ash, still hot, but slower, silent, thoughtful and dark.

When the last innocent blood sizzles away in the blaze, the final lad comes through.

This fire must be kept lit. For as long as it burns the Flammeous Lads will serve its keeper, resentfully or not. If the fire goes out, they will begin to cool inwardly and die, eventually slumping to the ground, looking, finally, little more than the bodies of burnt children, dropped inexplicably beyond the reach of any blaze.

Before they die they will go mad with rage, attacking everything they can, wreaking first, revenge on those who called them through the flame.

The Flammeous Lads look a little like barbecued boys or baked apes. They range in size from two to four feet tall, with most around three feet high. They move a lot like apes, knuckle-walking and scampering in rushes. The red ones climb well. The slower, more ashen and aware ones walk like men and often seem to lead and plan. A wise Ash Boy will stay by its originating fire, seeking to secure the means of its continued being. Even staying hidden in the flame itself, under the kindling or guarded by the licking tongues. It waits and watches, making sure that no-one tries to put it out.

Their flesh is burnt red like raw meat. Like a victim pulled, seconds ago, from a blazing home, they sizzle and smoke. They actually smell rather nice, like cooking pork. Their eyes are milky white pools. Their teeth are always white as well, like badly baked porcelain webbed with cracks. As strong as men, they grin. Some proportioned like boys, some like apes or other things.

They are violent chaotic and cruel, with the sharp cunning of bad boys. Traps and schemes are not beyond their thought. Battle-by-harassment is a favourite thing. Secrecy is known to them ("and cunning." -L) To climb houses, break and enter, hide in alleys, throw knives and bricks. The red ones do not speak but their laughter and screams sound like that of mad boys, or boys in pain. Some of the darker ones communicate in strangled words.

They are brave and bold, undisciplined. Flammeous Lads race in and out of battle, retreating, or attacking en masse. They won't hold a position for too long. After a long while they tire, get bored and want something else to do. Orders requiring time, focus and a lack of force will often fail. Nevertheless, if given something direct and horrible to achieve: "kidnap the daughter of the queen" the Flammeous Lads can be inventive in the extreme with their cruel and cunning schemes.

They are hard to harm with fire and feel very little pain, but they can be chopped up, smashed, drowned and salted. (They fear salt on their skin.) They can be pierced, but must be run through like a pin holder or a ball of overtaxed wool to shut them down.

"No one knows from whence the baked boys come. Few doubt that it's direct from hell, the souls of boys born bad let out on trips to continue now what they did then. Others posit impud from eternal lands of fire, or the products of bad dreams, nightmares of a future war, perhaps cursed children of a perverted ancient race. I have come think they are those sacrificed in times long past to gods of brass and burnt in those furnace hearts, thus given to them utterly and raised by horned and shining monsters in their cruel realm. The words I think are names of ancient gods. So perhaps for them, revenge is justified. Vengeance against all who live and breathe an air unstained by fire and pain." - Zenithal.

FRUIT HOUNDS or PIN-DOGS

The surface of the Hound is black and gnarled, tough like of old boots. The thorns that stick out are exceedingly sharp. No eyes or ears can be seen but the Fruit Hound seems to find its way around easily enough.

They can dash quite quickly on their pointed limbs, but usually remain curled up into a spiky lozenge.

This shape is hard to penetrate or hurt so only the most dangerous of creatures will attempt to consume them, which is exactly as they wish.

When threatened, or when it senses potent creatures nearby, the Fruit Hound will uncurl into its dog form. It will attack. First any creature that seeks to penetrate its rind. Then anyone else nearby.

Fruit Hounds can remain dormant for a very long time. Once dropped from the branches of the Catastrophe tree they will remain where they are for years, ripening, blackening and growing more fierce. Sometimes washed or carried away by storms or floods.

The purpose of the Fruit Hound is not to kill (although en-masse they often do so) but to ensure that it is eaten by the most ferocious and dangerous beast possible. This can include man.

This is to increase the chances of the seed of the catastrophe tree coming to rest in a place thick with violence and conflict.

Inside the Fruit Hounds is a delicious high-protein rind that looks, and tastes a little like roast beef, but softer and more sweet. The older the

Fruit and the longer it rests, the sweeter and more strong this rind becomes.

Fresh Fruit Hounds with the rind still green can make a meal for several.

The oldest Fruit Hounds can heal when eaten. They can close wounds and even cure disease. But these hounds lie thickly around the trunk of the Catastrophe Tree, to retrieve one risks awaking a great many at once. This is dangerous work.

Whoever seeks to steal a medicinal hound must sneak quietly through the maze of greyblack roots, black spikes and silver leaves, through the brittle white bones of the dead in the shade of the tree, reach one of the oldest fruits fallen near the trunk, dislodge it without waking it, then escape, all without alerting the rest of the Pin-Dogs. If one awakes then all awake as one.

That being done, they must take the hound away, subdue it and hope that its beefy rind is rich enough to cure the ailment in question.

In addition to that, once the consumer has passed the fruit, they risk depositing the seed for another Catastrophe Tree, perhaps even near their very home. Someone must take the faeces of the healed individual and carry it out a long way from where they live, to some stony place, and cast it on the ground, hoping no catastrophe takes place nearby and causes the tree to germinate.

Of course, if an animal, or adventurer is killed trying to sneak into the shadow of the Catastrophe Tree, then this is simply a minor Catastrophe, off which the tree will feed, and thence grow more tempting hounds. Their bones are common underneath the silver leaves.



CATASTROPHE TREE

The Catastrophe Tree feeds not on rain or the light of the sun, but madness and disaster. Its fruit is delicious, dangerous and sharp.

Its branches cast a pall of pearly grey, and the earth there can be thick with the black spikes of fallen hounds, hidden by the piled-up silvery leaves of the tree itself.

No mortal chemistry imbues those bitter leaves with life, or tangles those black roots. The Catastrophe Tree can grow where nothing else survives. Without water, without heat and even in the darkness beyond the reach of the day. Its trunk is iron hard and so cancerously packed with clustered knots it blunts the woodsman's axe within a clutch of blows. Its roots ramble chaotically deep into the ground, removing them is both a puzzle and a grind.

To germinate, they require only disaster. A single death is enough, but should a city burn or a race die, every tree within a hundred miles will bud forth as one. All who see it know that somewhere near, horror stalks the earth. The tree grows slowly, feeding off the minor deaths of animals or wandering things. Should another Catastrophe take place, another surge of growth will begin.

There is no upper limit to the size of the tree. Ancient ruins of forgotten cultures are often dotted with the trees, still basking in the faint afterwash of whatever broke the walls and cracked the stones. In some cursed corners of the earth that have never known peace, the trees reach up like temple columns into the sky. And tales of rumoured eons speak of black pillars so high they breached the heavens and were brought down only by the actions of gods.

Its leaves, if chewed can numb the pain of life. Not the physical pain of wounds, but the sorrows of existence itself. Those chewing the leaf are sealed against terror, fear, sorrow, sadness, hope and joy. Nothing touches them. The leaves are extremely addictive, and banned in all civilised lands. At the same time, they are also very valuable. Their nature will be known to any professional criminal, but not necessarily anyone else.



FULVOUS DRUDGE or TASTY NEWT BOYS

Stupid, servile and delicious, the Tasty Newt Boys are a depressing grey-green, attaining full fulvouness only after staining themselves yellow with the bile of their victims and pulps chewed from the seeping sap of certain glooming roots and nuts. The greater a Newt Boys dominance and strength, the more bile it will seize and the more pulps it will chew, the more yellow it will become, turning at first fulvous, then xanthic bright. And the brighter the newt the more things it has eaten, and the greater the dreams of its knowledge will be when you gobble it up.

The Fulvous Drudge are the size of small and slender men. They have strong legs and a tail of equal thickness to the thighs. Along the back extends fin or ridge of flesh, often the tallest point of the Newt Boys as they tend to walk hunched over with their shoulders raised.

Their lips are black; their eyes are like drops of dirty rain hanging from a bare black branch, reflecting the surrounding world, but through a murk. Their arms are slender, with a three-clawed hand. Their tongue is most remarkable, two or more feet long, more often out than in, pink and motile with a delicate multi-forked tip that quests hunting in the air. They can smell thinking and the chemical action of the mind as it works, a subtle scent, but impossible to hide, unless you think of nothing at all.

The Tasty Newt Boys have the intelligence and enthusiasm of a smart dog, making them loyal, active and good for no particular complex task. They will attempt them if ordered to, with disastrous effect. Cooking, cleaning, the guarding of delicate things, all will be catastrophically bargled in a mad parody of necessary deeds. They can be relied on to chase and hunt an active prey, at least until it bores them.

They are happily craven things, cringingly servile before huge or remarkable beings. This makes them favoured pets of certain things that dwell beyond the light. Some fearsome entities allow the Fulvous Drudge to live and breed within their dank abodes. In the wilds they can be found round pools and tarns, though rarely so yellow, they are more successful as symbionts or hangers-on to something worse.

These creatures eat the Newt Boys. They reach down and grab the brightest by the tail. If the Fulvous Drudge is lucky, the tail comes off, (a new tail grows back in a couple of weeks, but the Drudge will lose its status in the pack and be unable to seize much bile or chew much root, losing its bright yellow shade.) In the case of an unfortunate Drudge, the tail stays on, the monster eats it whole.

The Newt Boys are delicious, hence the name. Their most exciting property is this, they metabolise the brain and keep its thoughts. If a Fulvous Drudge consumes the brain of an animal, it receives dream like comprehension of that creatures recent life. These are fragmentary visions, impulses and smells, but the more a thing a Newt Boy eats, the more it knows.

They are stupid things and cannot make much from the taste of complex thoughts. A very clever Tasty Newt Boy might perhaps attain a single spell after eating a sorcerer whole. But they can learn things like travelled paths, the shapes and sounds of people, simple words, the way into a fort, the things something has seen. So they may exhibit sometimes an unexpected cleverness and familiarity with things they should not know. (Zenithal has said that an Alpha Drudge, after eating several men, may pick up and wield a spear or sword.) Or find their way to places they have never been.

This knowledge is not only learnt, but stored, in their delicious and detachable tails. Anyone eating the tail of a Tasty Newt Boys receives in woozy visions, knowledge they compiled from things they ate. This allows anyone with a regular supply to sit at the centre of a dreamy web of thought. In any particular place where Newt Boys lair, the rats and lesser things observe it all through their tiny eyes. The Newt Boys eat the rats and know what they have seen. And whatever eats the Newt Boys knows it all, attaining a kind of weird panopticon consciousness through regular feasts.

(Leptoblast claims that Jukai nobles assemble secretly in the lower levels of the city at night, at the borders of the alkali slums, and "make great and decadent feasts of these horrible things, dredged at huge expense from the far horizon, then fall afterwards into a kind of vile dream in which they take on the aspects of beasts." Though as usual he offers no proof of this.)

In the case of intelligent intruders, the usefulness of the Fulvous Drudge is sharpened still. They can interrogate effectively through consumption. There is no need to keep prisoners alive, simply feed them to the Newt Boys then eat their tails. Rumours state that the Second Chancellor of Jukai City keeps, not a torture chamber, but a cage of Tasty Newt Boys, the threat of their horrific attentions being enough to loosen any tongue. Although if a Drudge who has eaten a prisoner with vital information escapes then catching them before they eat much else and blur the knowledge in their tails can be an extremely difficult process, especially as owning or eating Tasty Newt Boys is technically illegal in most civilised lands. And because the Newt Boy knows what the prisoner knew and can repeat their schemes.

FURNACE CHLOROCHORUS

(Chlor-ok-us)

Born from the union of eight evil women and one unwise man, the Furnace is an immortal flame and ceaseless nest of schemes.

Green flame, bonfire-high, bright as smargadine or glaucous as a distant sea. In its midst: a gaping face, a leering idiot whose eyes are black pits in the fire and mouth a gnashing void bordered by blunt tomblike elephantine teeth. The fire-voice laughs and shouts, a violent child, it speaks but little, yet eats people with aplomb. The true threat is the snakes.

Around the central fire curl snakes of smoke and flame. They spray out from the central blaze like the branches of a tree and curl around its base like roots. The Serpents cradle the green fire, shifting endlessly in a scaffolding of self-knotting smoke. The furnace slides around on scorched earth and soot-blackened floors

Each serpent sister has a name and the name is either infamous or lost to time. Their eyes are burning red, and despite their snakelike forms, no two are the same. Each is clearly different with a character of its own. They are the true mind of the green fire. Cunning, clever and gleefully cruel, they delight in schemes and evils of all kinds, plotting sometimes even against each other despite their bound-together fates. Each serpent knows one spell, this spell is written burning on its smoky scales. A serpent may intone its spell at any time and as many times as it likes.

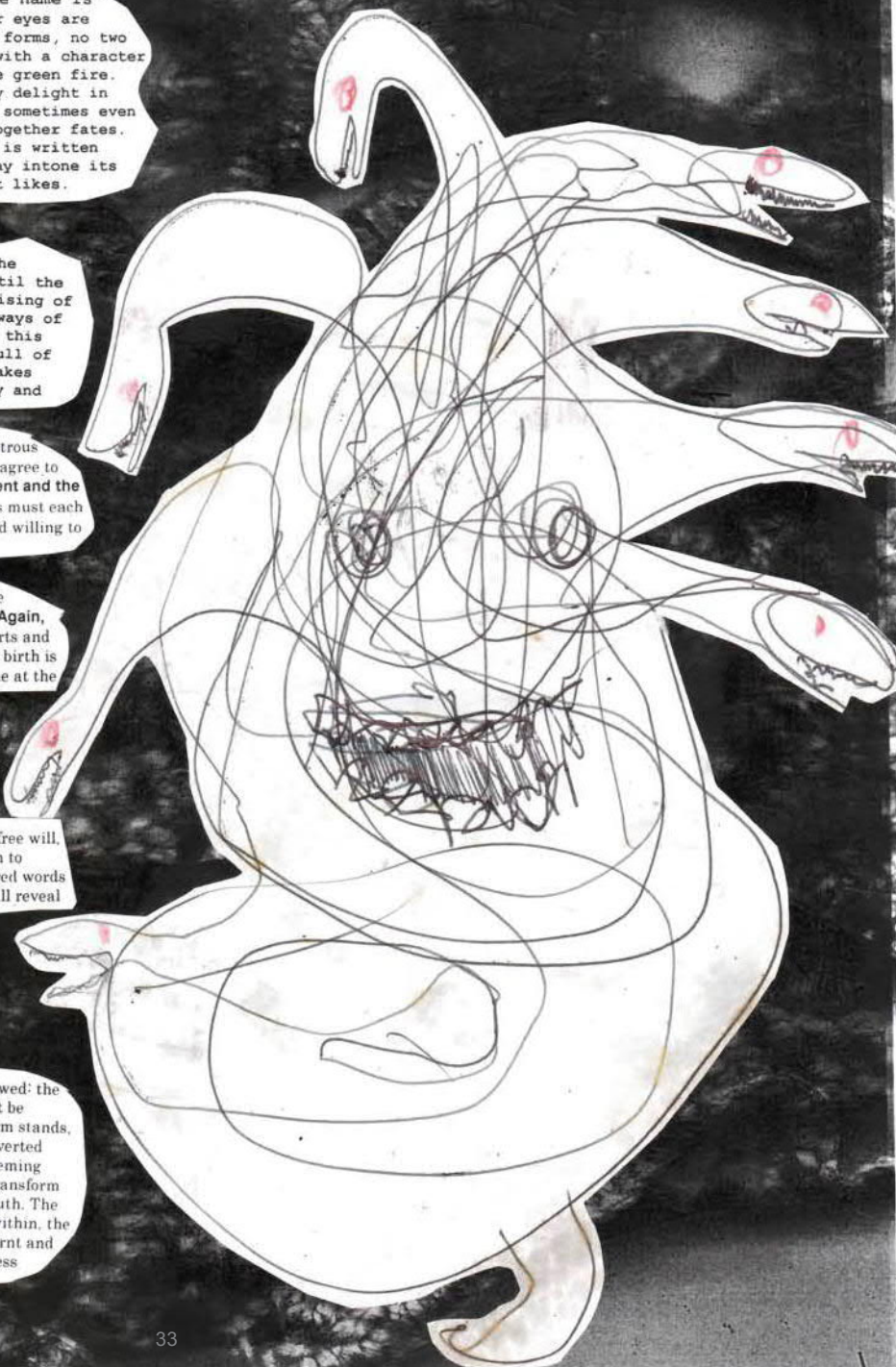
The life of the fire is the life of the snakes. The serpents of smoke and fire can never truly die until the fire is doused. They guide and protect it, fantasising of unlikely threats, planning, thinking, dreaming always of ways to keep it safe. No mediocre cold can freeze this fire, nor simple bucket quench its life. A riverfull of water, or the utter void might put it out. The snakes dream fearfully of such things and plan constantly and cleverly against the day when they arise.

"Most vile and salutary is the tale of the creation of this monstrous flame. At its core exists a pact, eight utterly evil women must agree to die. (It is likely that between five and eight would be sufficient and the gender limits have never been confirmed- z) These beldames must each be skilled in dark and magical art, utterly without scruple, and willing to work closely together. Rare conditions, rarely matched.

Having bound their compact in their blood, they must begin the corruption, by whatever means, of a powerful and noble man. (Again, untested - z) The man in question must be strong, a man of parts and inner force and genuinely good. A man of high ideals and noble birth is best, the deeper he should fall, the higher burns the green flame at the end.

The target of their Subtle Art must choose, of his own unbound free will, to join the women in a grotesque and awful deed. A ritual known to almost none, and never written down, passed on in only whispered words by the witches of the wastes and sorcerers of the bogs. Yet, I shall reveal it now! (unbelievable - z)

A huge fire must be created in a pit, the only kindling to be allowed: the dried corpses of poisonous snakes! Surely many thousands must be hunted and preserved to feed this fire. Above the blaze a platform stands, upon it is the man. Now a sadly ruined being, a wasted and perverted shell, thrall in durance vile to the sickening whims of the scheming sorceresses! These haridans stand with him and, one by one, transform themselves to snakes. They slither up his body, and into his mouth. The snakes squirm inside his belly. As they bite him to death from within, the man falls into the fire. Man and snake, magic and flame now burnt and bound as one, the Furnace Chlorochorus is born. Immortal, unless destroyed." - Leptoblast.



FUSE MEISTER

You die fast but while you live you live
like a flame.

The Compact of Combustion is not too hard to complete. Even the grimly dense and mentally tired can track it down and work it out. And that's what most Fuse Meisters used to be before they burned: ordinary, boring, mediocre, slightly pointless people with vague undefined lives.

They changed that though.

The Compact consumes your life, translates it into something else. In one moment the prism of your being twists. Everything you are and were and all Fate had for you to be, the entirety of your future life--however long it would have been--is seized and wrangled in the Compact's hands. All the life you would have had is forced into your body in one go. The sluices open; every year between now and the grave flows torrential through your hands.

You burn alive.

Inaphine flame cascades from out your mouth, your body chars in argent fire, your head reduced to ash, your body black: a hunched figure of charcoal and carbonised flesh. Your soul becomes a fuse projecting from your neck. A long angular animate black fuse up to six and a half feet long, tipped by the fire that is your will-to-live. This fire is now your face and head, how you perceive the world, the organ of your sense, your voice. The flame features shift to match your own, but your face changes rapidly now, the way fire changes as it burns, shifting in its colour and its heat. And you are bright.

This fuse is constantly and slowly burning down at the rate of roughly one foot per year. When it's gone, so are you, for good. It's possible you may explode, or just drop dead to the ground like kindled wood. Something even more amazing may occur--who knows?

A Fuse Meister has the intelligence and drive of a full life, compressed and concentrated. They are never slow. They think, decide, act and move about at speed. They do not sleep. Perceptive and aware, they learn things fast, much faster than a merely-mortal being; extra-mortal Meisters never need to see a thing shown twice. Magic comes fluidly and quickly to them, even if they knew none before. They have a way with flame and favour spells of fiery flamboyance and dramatic effect.

All Fuse Meisters are famous for their deeds. They spit out small ambitions preferring only great desires. Great-heroic, great and strange, terrible and great or simply great alone. To change the face of nations, avenge giant wrongs, free whole peoples from the whip, battle titanic evils, explore impossible realms or be the first to think the most shattering ideas. Whatever they do, they do to the maximum extent, with a deep passion for life and fearing almost nothing. What little fear they feel is spice to them. People know that when a Fuse Meister arrives, wonder, danger and adventure are not far behind.

Sometimes they are compassionate, chaotic, intuitive and wild. Sometimes strange and distant and indifferent to this world. An evil Fuse Meister is very rare, few dark souls would choose to deliberately shorten their own life, although they can be indifferent to the point of callousness.

Rogues and adventurers flock to them like moths to candle flames, and with similar effect. Few can move so fast, fear so little or sustain such passion without pause.

No force or power loathes Fuse Meisters more than the Geyser Lords. The Meisters' short-lived perspective, total lack of fear, ability to wield magical flame, intelligence, and tendency to overturn social arrangements and long-prepared schemes at the drop of a hat enrages them. They drown them whenever they can. Fuse Meisters ignore this threat, eyes fixed on some vital attainment, which frustrates the Geyser Lords still more.

Some are seen in feathered cloaks and intimate alliance with the Dreamons and the land of sleep. Others claim to duel the Dreamons at the gates of other realms in some formally-arranged yet vital way. Whatever the truth, some strange relationship exists between the sleepless men and the watchers on the borders of night.

The Fuse Meisters flaming will-to-live can be extinguished by anything that kills a normal fire. If this occurs the Fuse Meister falls to the ground effectively

dead. Temporarily. The flame can be re-lit in the same way, by any normal fire. The Fuse Meister stands up and carries on, directly from the point where they left off. For them no time has passed. No Fuse Meister would ever deliberately put themselves out, no matter the circumstances, and no force or power exists that can extend their life once their fuse has reached its end.

It is the Compact that they made.



GEISHA SPORES

Women fall in their hundreds, drifting down silently out of a midnight sky, landing in waves and milling palely in the night.

A Geisha Spore is clearly not a human being. She stands about four and a half feet high. Her flesh is pale, translucent like a solid kind of mist, within strange webs and structures can be seen. Small dark organs floating free. Strands of inner black support her weight, not bone, more like wood or wire in how it acts.

She is shaped like a young woman just out of her teens. Draped around her pseudo-face, the 'hair' is one semi-transparent sheet, the same substance as the rest of her. The face has two long black eyes and a purse-lipped closed black mouth.

They never speak.

From her back spreads a ray of tendrils of the same black substance as her bones. Smooth and strong, they wave endlessly as if catching an imperceptible wind.

"Extending webs of filament. Much too small for the eye to see. A surface area great enough to allow the slight body of the spore to drift on tempests which, must lie above our lesser airs." - Ashkott

Once landed, the spores rarely take off again unless very strong storms occur with hurricane-fast winds.

The spores are stronger than they look but rarely fight. A Geisha Spore will simply do whatever anyone tells it to, so long as it does not endanger its own life. It has the intelligence of a child and is capable of performing simple tasks.

When it can, it will kiss a human being, then die.

The kiss injects into the mouth and sinuses a dusty cloud of smaller spores which rapidly infest the flesh. These burrow through body, consuming and replacing those parts which transmit movement and thought. The means the fungi use to replace those parts which think and act are crude and large. Knots and lumps will appear where nerves and joints once were.

A wave of paralysis moves slowly through the body as its parts are eaten and replaced. When the new crude fungal versions are complete, movement and a sense of touch return. There is no pain.

Eventually the fungi reach the brain. Slowly but surely the plates of the skull crack open and are pushed aside as new mind-matter blooms within. Sometimes the eyes are pushed out and hang down the face.

The subject seems unbothered by all this. The simulation of the personality goes on, totally unaware that it is a copy of a person who is effectively already dead. The replaced parts are tougher and more resistant to damage than animal flesh, the person is stronger. They need not be dangerous and will simply try to continue their old life. Usually they are forced out or burnt alive. Some desperate families try to keep them secret or locked up.

When the first sign of a storm is felt, they will move instinctively to higher ground. They face the storm and a long black stalk bursts from their throat. The human body sloughs away as the stalk reaches higher.

The new growth will release its cluster of tiny Geisha Spores into the moving air. They will float upwards, feeding on lightning and sunlight until they finally become heavy enough to sink back to earth somewhere in the night.



"It is a cycle, simply one whose continuation is beyond our reach. Let us look to fungi; a fungal spore does not instantly turn into a mushroom, it forms a mycelin web and only when conditions are favourable does it pop out a fruiting body. Clearly, the spores form hyphae networks inside clouds, or stretched absurdly thin in that upper world between the stars and our own. They wait, attending to conditions down below. When the situation is ripe, the Geisha form and drift down in the night.

As to what conditions, exactly, the Geisha look for, there many be many, but I suggest: desire. Driver of the human engine. Great loneliness and need, sensed, somehow in the clouds above, signals of isolation rippling invisibly through a lucent network far above our heads, causing it to coalesce, to form and shape its spore, to rain down mindless angels of seduction on the hope that even one may live and kiss and birth the cycle once again." - Zenithal

GEYSER LORD ORACLE OF THE VENT FUMEROLE LICH

There are caves where Kings have crawled and Emperors have knelt to hear a fortune that is never wrong. Deep beneath the earth, in spaces choked with heat and fumes, there are said to be oracles. Chancellors of hidden thought who knot or unknot curses dealt by gods, unfold the futures branching paths and open secrets long since lost.

And in the fields of pitted boiling clay, where gouts of water burst in regular time from the grounds gaping wounds, there are said to be Lords, who rise up from the black earth and rule a while, delivering compulsions and revenge to those who come.

And philosophers will say the oracle is just a girl, in a mask, tripped out of her mind on fumes and faith and that the shaman in the boiling lands is just the totem of a savage tribe.

They are wrong.

In the pit in the earth is a fountain of water the colour of night. If you could taste it, it would taste of iron and lead and a thousand bitter poisons. Like the edge of a stained and ruined sword. You never will. This water burns. Hot enough to take your flesh off at a touch.

When they come for the future, or commands, if they come at the right time, the water rises up, it surges and falls back. Trembling and cringing like a frightened dog. Then it fountains in a boiling column.

In the geyser in the sacred ground, the same thing occurs. The water drops, then surges, shifts its colour and smell, then vomits in a torrent like a column of black glass. Poisoned steam curtains it and sinks in wreaths of toxic fog to curl about the feet.

Inside the boiling black water is the Geyser Lord. The Oracle Of the Vent.

A long torso, coiling like a flanged worm, white as melting snow or sugar in a drink. Slim black tentacle hands press against the surface of the flow. Its head, no face, no eyes, no mouth, a spray of tongues. Flat red extended ribbons coloured like the sides of bleeding meat. They wave gently in the boiling water, tasting the toxins that flow past. Listening to the vibrations of speech.

The deep-dwelling sorcerer worms live darkly at the oceans deepest points. Moving amongst the vents of fierce water, black smoke and crushed steam that come up from the planets core. They drift amongst dense forests of white worms, white crabs and strange bacterial growths, listening to the earth, thinking on its words, working their strange magic's, in an place where few could ever go or would even think to look. Each rules one vent and there they usually remain, gazing down into the pit of poison and black fire that gave them life, musing on the strange deep politics of that even-deeper realm, and considering also, sometimes, the great cold desert of the outer word and the spare and starry reaches of the surface above the seas.

And sometimes, rarely, the reasons turn inside their minds, the taste of some unsuspected future meets their tongue, their attention shifts, and for reasons of their own, they seek to influence the outside world. Our world.

They can only survive for long inside the torrents of poisoned smoke that make up their homes, so they look for the rare veins and scabs



of stone where the blood and breath of the deep comes forth. They cause the earth to flex and ride the hissing torrents till they stand suspended in boiling crepuscular thrones, and can speak, directly, with those here.

Dark and poisoned words torrent from them like the fumes of the earth. They speak the verse of magma flows and deep magnetic shifts prophecies of fire and stone. They bring wisdom from the dark, but sorrow too for they care little for the lives of men, or peace, or love, or gods, or life.

Their schemes are deep and long, directed at the eternal or those deep in time. There are vendettas from the beginning of the world, and from its end. The lives of human kingdoms, or cultures, can be little more than the turn of a card in one of these great games.

The futures of the Geyser Lords are always right, black, violent, seductive and harsh. They speak of war, of empire and of heroes deeds. Of horror also. Those who listen well will know glory and death, those who listen not, and seek to break the geysers word, will know death only, at the hands of those who do.

Only the destruction of the Geyser Lord itself can stop its prophecy coming true.

They must be paid. Sometimes in sulphur and gold, cast into the water when they rise, but any payment can be demanded.

Some Geyser Lords bend your fate to escape their own. They seek to become the Fumarole Lich, and fearless of the cold, move directly from their world into our own. Out of the fountain, into the light. It would be incredibly dangerous if any were to achieve this.

GLYPHAPILLAR

These tiny crawling grubs possess one unnatural defence: they make you go away.

They are short, squat and segmented, about an inch long, and an inch in height. (The Glyphapillars tail is raised and pointed in the air, it waggles as they walk around.) Half an inch wide and coloured a dazzling zinnober green.

Almost all of the time and in almost every way, the Glyphapillar does very little at all. They are neither intelligent, venomous nor swift. They simply plod around and eat dead wood, or wait for wood to die, which takes a while.

The only interesting thing the Glyphapillar has is written on a translucent carapace across its single frontal eye. This has, by fluke or fate or random chance, formed a Mark of Warding. A product of High Art, of the same kind used to seal a circle or sorcerous book.

Though only on a tiny scale, the symbol etched upon the Glyphapillars front is active, effective and functions powerfully at its task. Nobody and nothing with a mind can come within a few feet of the Glyphapillars gaze. They can be sidled up on from the flank or rear, but if you catch its gleam: the sign repels. You will find yourself backing away, even being forced, feet dragging furrows in the dirt.

The gaze of a single Glyphapillar is just enough to push you back beyond arms reach, but the gaze-force grows with the numbers looking. Glyphapillars nest together, feeding slowly and en-masse on certain dead and dying trees. If disturbed, the colony creeps out and lines the dying limbs like sparks of green fire. They look at what disturbs them. This combines their power. If it holds a mind the subject of their gaze will be repelled, not just a few feet but twenty, thirty, forty feet away. It depends, simply, on the size of the hive and the unity of the gaze.

"Glyphapillars do tend to lie in trees near sinkholes, on the edge of cliffs or bogs, or in other irregular or broken ground. Whether this is instinct, chance, or learned behaviour, is very hard to tell. Once the threat is gone the Glyphapillars go quietly back to munching dead wood with tiny mouths located underneath their heads." - Zenithal

"Many are the speculations held on this most simple and mysterious of living things, many origins suspected and tales told of whence they come.

Their repelling gaze is said to work, not just on living things, but on any minded beast, from animals as simple as mice and birds, to men, tetramorphs of many kinds, constructs, 'angels' and visitors from 'supernatural' zones. This leads to the theory that they are from some Other place, unlike our own, where such a power, working on the mind itself and not the flesh, would be most valuable.

This tale I heard from a simple drunk-of-the-swamps on a journey through the moors, I repeat it here, as best I can in its original language and tone:

"Gaol they make, they Fey Folk in the wood. From worms. (They eat the black bark.) I saw one. A pretty meadow, with flowers, and a knight. A knight on his knees and his head bowed, and long hair, grey, in loops on rusted mail from rain. Ring of black dead trees with green ones. Not leaves, shining, green coins and gems. LOOKIN' AT HIM. Eatin' the black trees, then lookin, eat some more. He was waiting for the trees to be et' down, then he would go. That or be let out. It is a smell they say, like ladies use, my friend he said:

"The Smell, the Smell you see" he said "that's the key to the green worms and to a prison of them. Learn that smell and make it and your out!"

But he never said how to learn or how to make it, since the Fey Folk guard it close like any key. So what use was it? I left soon after that. Never went back."

Also worth recalling is the legend of the Glyphapillars Lie, familiar to you, no doubt, as a child's fairy tale. In fact a relic of an ancient story-cycle in which the Power or Entity named as 'Moon-Reflecting-From-Metal' is being pursued by the Creature or Thing known as 'Ten-Shadows'.

(for complex inter-dynastic reasons of the Other World which I will not go into here, for the full legend I direct to you Stammels Encyclopedia Of Ancient Myth.)

Moon-Reflecting-From-Metal hides within a forest, he/she sees a small 'Shining Worm' and speaks to it saying:

"Friend, you shine as I do, you see we are family. Only protect me now and I will do you a service."

The Worm offers no reply. Moon-Reflecting-From-Metal nevertheless hides nearby.

Ten-Shadows then arrives and calls the sorrows of the Trees and asks them.

"Sorrows, you serve me. Where is Moon-Reflecting-From-Metal?"

But the sorrows can speak only of what they have lost not what they have found. They say nothing. Then Ten-Shadows calls forth the Dreams Of The Fire and says:

"Dreams, you serve me, where is Moon-Reflecting-From-Metal?"

But, of course, the Dreams can speak only of what they will one day consume, and Moon-Reflecting-From-Metal dies by water, not by fire. They say nothing.

Then Ten-Shadows notices the shining worm upon the leaf and says:

"Worm, I am Ten-Shadows, I am the darkness between the lights in the sky, I am the fear in your mind when you wake in the night, I am the edge of the Axe of Time called Death, where is Moon-Shining-On-Metal?"

And the worm says "If he is not made of wood, I do not know."

Assuming this means Moon-Shining-On-Metal is not nearby, Ten-Shadows passes on and continues his pursuit. Moon-Shining-On-Metal then emerges from his/her hiding place and, pleased with the worm, writes a letter on its eye 'to keep it safe'.

An interesting fragment and about as likely to be true as any other theory." - Leptoblast.

"The Glyphapillar is, in fact, an example of Neoteny. It is a larval stage, adapted to sexually reproduce without maturation. When exposed to certain environmental conditions they transform into their adult form. This is the dangerous Vitallery. The stimulus is fire. A fact only I have ascertained. I hope this answers any criticisms made about my use of fire. My samples are my samples, and if they must be burnt, they must be burnt. A test is not complete until the sample is used up." - Ashkott

HADEANS

LEPTOBLAST - WHAT THEY DO

Strange beings they are, with strange rages and strange wants. Heralds of destruction and bringers of war, yet also saviours and preservers, born from one disaster, disappearing with the next.

The Hadeans always emerge first from the heart of annihilating chaos. They have been said to step from the explosion as a meteor lands, to germinate inside the womb of a Tsunami as it mounts the earth, they walk calmly out of cyclones and climb volcano lips as they erupt. Always they are born from disaster, is if animating spirits of those dark events, given life and form.

Yet they come not as destroying angels, but as conspirators of harm. Hadeans work in secret, invulnerable as they are, they hide from view, working through long chains of intermediate beings. It is an unexpected cunning, employed with subtlety and care, whose ends remain unknown till they emerge.

Their interest in war is well observed. How many wars, quietly midwived by alien things, have swept across the earth, cannot be told. Where the webs of their conspiracies are found, they relate to the deepest and most intensive conflicts, wars in which great energies are unleashed, wars where nature is upended and total violence rules. Hadeans take some interest in the hearts of these great conflicts: they provoke and sustain them if they can.

This would be enough to make them enemies indeed, but their schemes often have another side. Few can fail to recall the records of the Great Comet, how it filled the sky, moving neither east nor west but advancing directly on. It seemed to every intelligent being that this celestial avenger was certain to strike our world, and much chaos resulted simply from this fear. And then, a few hours before the estimated impact, it disappeared. It did not land, it did not pass the world. The comet was stolen from the sky. Reports from every shore relate intense Hadean action at the time. In many places they walked openly amongst men. Gigantic organs and devices vast are reported, not simply by credulous common fools, but by educated men.

What occurred? Did these creatures simply summon a world-destroying threat, then change their minds? Did they somehow save the world? And if they did, then why?

This is not the only mixed report of Hadean deeds. Coastal cities have reported gigantic waves advancing from the sea, big enough the wipe out life for miles around. On the brink of disaster, as the wave crests, just before the impact comes, the Tsunami disappears. They say 'broken into splinters, like a mirror falling to the ground, then swept away.' And reported on the scene: Hadeans, in great numbers.

Cyclones have disappeared, earthquakes have been calmed, or killed. dark eruptions have been quelled or stolen from the air.

ASHKOTT - THE TYPES

I have noted three, but there are more. The first amongst them, shaped like men, I call 'Prime Hadean' or simply 'Hadean'. They are taller, stronger and more slender than men, with a curving wide-shouldered trunk and long limbs. Their heads are alien and strange, vertical ellipses split into three fronds rising like a crown, a single circular lidless eye and what may be smaller sensing organs running up the leaves of their divided face.

The second sort, which I have named the 'Engine Beast', walk like tall six legged pigs. They are hoofed and their faces are radially split, having four equidistant eyes, like the True Hadeans these eyes will never close. Upon their backs, where men might strap a load onto a beast, is an odd emanating construction, like the model of a castle placed upon a donkey. This spiked organ grows into three bladed vanes and I have seen it burn with light. This light was like bright summer sun seen through the borders of a dark advancing cloud. It was somehow both bright and dark, like a strong star in a black-clouded sky. This creature I suppose lends service to the rest. As, for us, a horse may lend its strength to the plough, a dog its nose to the hunt or a cat its cunning to the guard, so I believe this creature, the Engine Beast lends Hadeans... something, that service they require to advance their unknowable aims.

The third kind I have seen seemed lesser than the rest. I have called it 'Guard-Beast' or 'Hadean Dog'. This walks upon four legs, with its round body close to the ground, to the rear comes a smooth tail, ending in a spike or pick. Facing forwards come two claws on the ends of short curving limbs, making its arrangement something like that of a fat scorpion. The head is simple and strange, an extension or vertical flap with one dominant cyclopic eye and a secondary directly beneath. Underneath the head and between its forward limbs is a large vertical mouth. This creature I think acts something like a dog or trained ape, marking the perimeter and performing simple tasks.

ASHKOTT - OF WHAT THEY ARE COMPOSED

They are clay, as many men of god have said we are. I think they must change their nature or die. Of the parts I have considered, there are few, for they are hard to kill indeed, and the samples recovered were already in the change of death, but what I found is this: A kind of grey-black clay-ceramic, extraordinarily dense and sometimes wet, boneless, but stronger and more brittle at the core. It moves in the hands unlike any other thing, flexible and subtle but strong, stronger than steel, sometimes stronger than stone. My tests of its limitations found no bounds, the greater force or fire I laid upon it, the less it seemed to change. Acid and extreme cold, high pressures and testing sharpness, heavy blows or the forge itself, all failed. Only on observing my control group did I start to understand.

It was the tests themselves that made the flesh so strong. Those samples subject to extremes grew stronger. Those battered by the greatest range of force, to fire and frost, acids and explosive force, were strongest of them all. Yet those untouched for several days began to slowly die. The wet clay of them coagulated into strands, and could be pulled apart like well-cooked meat. This was their decay. Not change, but stasis spelled their doom.

LEPTOBLAST - OF THEIR SORCERY

Hadeans are masters of fire, frost, storm and bolt. No human thaumaturge has ever met their challenge in this art. They have been known to summon forth, in quick succession, freezing winds, great storms of fire and falling rock, mad lightnings, the surges of great waves, hurricanes of poisoned air, movements of the earth and blasts of acid, mud and molten stone. They conduct these manifold annihilating forms as if an orchestra of destruction was waiting, just out of sight, at their command.

ASHKOTT - ON THEIR MAGIC

On observing Hadean magic I have noted two things:

Firstly: they are not profligate; despite their enormous power and the ease and fluidity with which they summon destructive harms, Hadeans make use of this ability as little as they can. Every previous report of contact was made in the midst of conflict and, typically, no compilation or analysis has been done. Though every individual conflict was violent and destructive in the extreme, the overarching strategy is clear. Hadeans generally retreat when faced in force. They use their enormous powers to the minimum extent. These beings born of destruction do not seek out conflict, they avoid it if they can. So potent they are that I suppose they must have little to fear of earthly weapons, their fear, I think, is not ourselves, but the diminution of some unseen resource. They are careful and conservative beings and they are guarding something.

Secondly: the light, both bright and dark, evinces when their powers are employed. Again, those subject to direct conflict tend to note the general force brought against them, but not any minor ancillary effects. They would record the firestorm, but not the light that came with it. I, however, have observed multiple conflicts of this type and read records of many more. When Hadeans summon destruction, when they first appear on earth, when they disappear and when they execute the keys of their strange plans, this light is seen. The light of the Engine Beast. The black-white light-dark burning shade.

ZENITHAL - WHEN THEY COME

Though my conclusions may seem radical in the extreme, even blasphemous, I ask only that you follow the logic of my assumptions to its necessary end.

My supposition is this: Hadeans are natural creatures. Not daemons or creatures from a supernatural realm, but mortal living beings, like us. Their plans and actions, though incomprehensible to us, are plans for their survival, they are trying, like every natural being, to stay alive.

Once this simple assumption is made, we need no longer look for bizarre plots or the influence of alien gods, we need only search for an environment in which the nature of the Hadeans makes sense.

What might this environment be like?

It would be a place of wild extremes. Of crushing heat, chilling cold, hurricane winds, of fire and storms, of acid and poison, each extreme leading directly and unpredictably to the next. In this chaotic world the Hadeans would be adapted perfectly to survive. Their incredible flesh, which seems to require huge charges of conflicting energy simply to cohere, would fit the situation well. In a state of primordial chaos they would seem not, as they do to us, like beings of enormous power, but like men. No stranger than a traveller shouldering their way against a storm.

I believe this place exists and that this is why Hadeans come as they do and where they do, in the heart of destruction. To them, these terrifying events are simply those points which seem most natural and correct. As a man lost in a desert seeks out the oasis, so a Hadean on our world hunts for the volcano or the storm. The remainder of the world must seem to them like a silent wasteland, quiet, still and full of stasis and death.

As to the reason for their arrival here, I will suggest: their world dies. That is why they come, to keep their world alive they farm destruction in ours.

This is why they encourage war, it is the only human action capable of birthing the destructions upon which they feed. That is why disasters disappear, why comets are stolen from the sky, why storms evaporate, why earthquakes seep away. They are being taken, somehow, to the Hadeans home, there to restore what they have lost.

No environment can maintain such a high state of energy for long. Like soup cooling or sediment falling, the energy must ebb and it must calm. For Hadeans, born to and adapted for a world of cataclysm and shock, this means slow death. A gradual loss of energy from the world, making theirs like ours, liveable for us, for them a nightmare of silence and decay. Whatever art or science they use to travel to our world, they use the same to take things back, and their 'magic', I believe, has the same source. The waves of conflicting destruction which they so freely wield, are simply gates into their world, and this is why they make such cautious use. Every time they use these powers, their home dies a little more. Hence the cunning, hence the stealth.

I have one supposition more: this world is ours

If we suppose, for a moment, the existence of alien worlds, we must admit that any intelligence capable of reaching beyond its own surface to scoop up destruction like loose wheat, would not come here. This world is peaceful, and there must be many where great violence reigns. Why come here to farm annihilation? I say: because they move no distance at all. They lack that art, Hadeans come through time itself.

It is known the world was made, and many myths and legends speak of this. All conflict. But it is reasonable to think there would be fire. This fire still burns within the earth, and must have cooled somewhat over the long reaches of existence. As well there must be storm and quake, perhaps the freezing winds of the upper air lay more directly on the earth. Perhaps the seas turned over in their sleep, perhaps the atmosphere was changed or poisons thronged. But certainly, it cannot be denied that the energies released in the creation of the world must have been vast, and that the time of its creation (however long that was) would seem to us a kind of hell. A Hades. A Hadean period in fact.

It is known that life within our world infests every available angle and aspect that it can, adapting, ever changing, always giving up new and unexpected forms, invading every environment. If we simply suppose the extension of life further back in time, and ask: in this Hadean period what kind of life would thrive? Here we have found our world, not circling some impossible star, but here, at home, within our distant past.

And we know that this world calms and dies, as it must, to become the world we know. And we know why Hadeans come. They are stealing from the future to sustain the past, and they will fail, as we and they both know they must. With every theft they only strip their future of a little chaos, putting off the inevitable end for days or months, yet making it more certain. Clawing at the slow-tightening noose around their necks, grasping a few seconds of breath.

HERMIT GEIST

This spirit flies its home around, feeding off the fear of those it lures, and seeking out a greater habitation for its slowly growing power. A predatory memory.

A Hermit Geist occurs only when a tragic death takes place in a small and portable place. A ghost forms in the air. A poltergeist. But light and portable as this habitation is, the ghost can move not only objects, but the thing entire. Slowly and secretly, the animating Geist will learn to pick up its tent, harness its cart to a spectral dray or tumble its yurt across the moonlit snow to find more prey. This must be done where no-one can observe, so hermit-geists are born in places very small and most remote.

The memory makes a shift because it has a choice. It need no longer wait, frozen in position, for the unsuspecting traveller to breach its rest. It can decide its motion, to expose itself or not, to rest somewhere undisturbed and slowly decay, or to hunt. The fear and terror given off by those it meets, and the souls of those who die, can fuel a spirit, making it more powerful. Death can be addictive. If the ghost frightens someone new to death, it grows in strength.

Out on the tundra, a nomad peers through densely falling snow and sees a Yurt placed oddly on a pathless reach. Deep in the night-forest the freezing woodcutter's lamp picks out a cottage side that seems to leap out of the gloom.

It was. It did. The ghost inside them picked them up and threw them through the air, dropping it silently in exactly that spot specifically to lure them in. It lit the lamps in the window. It kindled the fire in the grate. The shelter is a trap.

The Geist learns to hunt. It moves its habitation secretly around. Travellers take shelter, are terrorised, and killed.

And the Geist grows in power. The better it can hunt the stronger it becomes. The stronger it becomes the more cramped and insufficient seems its home.

It will seek out new habitation. But not just any place will do. It must be a scene of tragedy. It doesn't matter if this tragedy was in any way connected to the Geist, it just needs a haunted place.

And then it fights. One night, a second property appears, facing the first. A supernatural battle begins, a battle of will and wits, of memory and desire. Should the Geist win, the opposing ghost is ejected from its home, the Geist occupies the new, more capacious residence. If the other ghost persists, (and there is a will to be or not-be, even in life's absence), it may take the Geist's former, lesser, home. Where there was but one predatory ghost, there are now two.

This is a traumatic and transforming act. The Geist leaves behind the memories and ideas and the dreams of the terrible deeds that first formed its shape in space. It becomes now something new. The first time is the hardest, but the second time, the third and fourth, fifth and sixth, become simplicity itself.

The name and face and wounds of death, the clothes, the race, the memory of the act, the knowledge of their innocence or guilt, the very reason for their life and death and life beyond, all are lost to an infinity of time and change. The memory has its life and shapes itself. They float like undulating flukes or strips of silk. Flat, simple, turtle-like heads, basic arms and bodies like long and crooked flags. The oldest are old indeed and have haunted species now extinct in worlds no-one recalls.

Many lands have tales of flying homes. A witch's cottage or scrocerer's tower that swoops through the clouds in the night. They do not think the witch a prisoner of the house, a peasant woman kept in fear and forced to act the part so that a ghost may freely hunt. And if the guards of civilisation act at all, they will certainly kill the witch, and if while licked by flames she screams "The house! The HOUSE--", no-one will be surprised.

At times, two mightily Alpha-Dead have met within a cities bounds. Slowly creeping closer over centuries and years, replacing burnt down or demolished homes, shuffling over parks, risking everything by leaping over streets in the early hours before dawn, feeding all the while on homeless people and the lost. Eventually they meet, and in a howling supernatural backwash that tornado's round the town, the weaker Geist will be destroyed and the stronger one expand.

Perhaps they dream to one day put on cities like a cloak, a million doors and windows under their control, a million separate lives to terrorise and end.

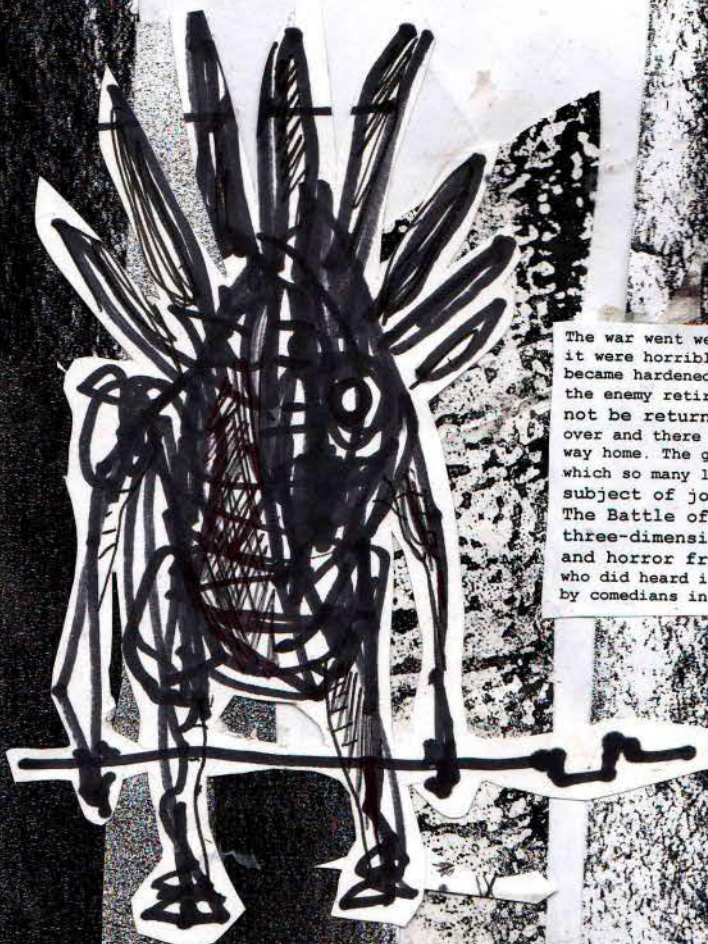
HEX DRAGOOONS

These deadly and vicious mercenaries are the broken relic of a now-shameful war. Trapped at their tiny size and disavowed by those they once served, Hex Dragons survive the only way they know how, through violence and murder sold to the highest bidder.

The average Hex Dragon stands about three and a half inches high. Most still wear the armour with which they were first equipped. A chest-plate and a blade or lozenge-shaped helm which, located forward of the head, has bulbous eyes on each side, delivering the near-360 vision which prevents them being taken by surprise or eaten by birds.

To the rear spill folds of soft metal or stiff silk, expanding in a kind of ruff. This rare vane-substance refracts magical attacks, turning it to a sparkling dust Dragons can use to hex you back. (It also looks very pretty.) This direct conversion of defence into magical assault gave them a necessary edge in the wars where they were first employed. The dorsal vanes can also flex and expand, increasing wind resistance; along with their tiny mass, this lets Dragons survive falls which, from their perspective, can be incredibly high. Most still carry their hexing wands. These enchanted lengths of yew fire recombinate curses. Each is composed of multiple rings around a solid core. The rings are marked with symbols, like the tumblers of a lock. By spinning them in combination, the Hex Dragon can generate highly specific curses.

In combat the rattling of their snap-spin curse was known and feared, they would strike and spin their curse-wand rings, and fire, in one movement, producing truly-random curses, impossible to predict or ward. The sound of the spinning rings was the herald of death.



They are cunning, patient and extremely skilled in military matters. They will follow a target group in secret, watching from the branches of trees using telescopes made from a drop of water and a curled-up leaf. They will use the environment against their foes, luring monsters, leading people astray, causing chaos invisibly, waiting for exactly the right moment to strike.

Dragoons cannot fly. To travel, they hunt and tame a range of wild animals. They are known to ride Crows, Parrots, Lizards and Dogs, but will seize mounts of any kind depending on terrain. High status Dragons will usually ride a more ferocious type to illustrate their rank: a bird of prey, a wildcat or even a wolf. (It is rumoured that out in the wilderness there are bands of truly evil bandit Hex-Dragoons whose

leaders ride blinded peasants and orphaned boys.)

Animals ridden by the Hex-Dragoons are always treated abominably. Dragons have no affection for them and regard mounts as machines of meat, to be used until they break, kept obedient with pain and fear. When the animal finally dies, a new mount is sought.

In every record kept of the Hex-Dragoons, they begin as honourable patriots. Their kingdom besieged by the invisible terror of magical beings. Children stolen, families abducted through mirrors, priests and heroes struck dumb or changed into beasts. The weak tempted with lies and the strong cursed with strange fates. A war of magic, invisible, intangible, a foe of tiny size, against which no blow could be struck.

Conventional forces were useless. Radical methods were employed. The appeal went out for volunteers willing to meet the enemy on their own ground, to besiege the mushroom rings and duel on the petals of flowers. Only the bravest and most able were accepted. They were warned the magic used to shrink so many in so short a time would be impossible to reverse, but each made the choice freely, from love of country.

The war went well, but the battles fought to win it were horribly violent and strange, survivors became hardened, traumatised and cold. Eventually the enemy retired, but the Hex Dragons could not be returned to normal size. The war was over and there was no-one left to fight, and no way home. The great battles that they fought, in which so many lost their lives, were now the subject of jokes, because they were small. The Battle of the Bathroom was a bloody three-dimensional slaughterhouse of magic and horror from which few returned, but those who did heard it sung about by drunks and mocked by comedians in bars.

Slowly, or quickly, the remaining Hex-Dragoons became corrupt. Treated with contempt by a world for which they had sacrificed all and to which they could not return, and loathed by the natural members of the microverse for the role they played. There was nowhere for them to turn and they had no skill to trade but harm.

Hex Dragons have drifted into lives as assassins, spies, murderers, thugs and enforcers for dark and unlikely things. Hunting pixies for witches, helping slaves by tracing escapees, carrying drugs to addicted aristocrats behind closed doors, sometimes hired by those they once fought, used in the horrid balkanised wars of the smaller world, they care not who they harm, or why, no deed is too dark for them, and even their payment is small as they require but little to survive.

The things they truly want, purpose and respect, are always beyond their reach. They loathe themselves, and everything else.

HOROLOGNOMON

A dying elemental of recorded time. Not of time itself, but of its careful division into hours and days and months and its recording in the world. Derived from the intelligent awareness of time, made incarnate through joint and angle, mechanism and transported stone. And dammed for that, for time survives its engineers and feeds on their devices. Time eats time and tolerates no harness or analysis for long. Time wipes clean its reflection in the glass, and that life born from its recording is born wrong.

Their shape is always that of Arachne, the spider. Like her - they do not speak; their words are silent actions. Like her - they wait, and watch, and build and kill. The nature of the Horolognomon, and its potency and size, is affected by the nature of the time it guards.

The most common Horolognomon is wax. Tiny, bulbous, yellow-white, brave, living only for a night. Where notched candles are used to mark the time they sometimes issue from the melting wax. Small spiders of wax, fierce guards of the flame as it burns throughout the dark, circling the furnace that will kill them before dawn. Pridefully they march the candles length, their circuits quicken as the column shrinks, perhaps they do not know (too small) the time they measure is their own. This is the horror of the Horolognomon.

In those distant lands where an artifice of wheels and springs is said to mark the hours, little brass escapement-horolognomon are born inside the cases and the clocks, leaping between the pendulums, frantically polishing the wheels as they spin. They guard these time-pieces, and are treasured for it, a watch inhabited is a notable thing, and worth much more. But if, in time, the timepiece goes unused, the spirit maddens and can leap from the casing on metallic limbs, attacking those who would not keep the time. Its sting ages flesh and wastes muscles and limbs. The poison of the Horolognomon is age.

There are Horolognomon of mercury and glass, of water, wood and golden weights. Some lair with living clocks in some populated place where their complicated clocks receive the constant care they need, but most do not. They can be found in tombs and temples lost to time, in cities, marking out the long degrees as trees grow through the empty streets. The time they keep counts nothing now, but still, they cannot stop. To stop is death. Filled with lassitude they lie upon their backs and twitch their limbs or ramble madly, scratching patterns in the dust, bursting into flurries of bipolar rage before sinking back into the long long dream of their madness.

They hunger for adjustment, and hate it above all. They may kidnap living beings and attempt to make them set or fix the clock. They may haunt the city, exterminating any expression of alternative time. Diaries, clocks, sundials, shadows on the ground. Flowers that drop their petals one by one may be torn up in rage. Those who count, those who speak an hour that cannot be, things with dates, things that age and things that never do. Enemies all, invisible and absolute.

The oldest Horolognomon are made of shadow, stone and light. Some come only in the day, when the shadow of a needle marks the earth, and others only when stars surrender their signals to the radial traps of stone.

The sundial spiders still haunt the titanic style raised so long ago to mark the passing of the sun. Built from joints of bright light and clearly marked dark shadow, straight lines and slender limbs of written stone, only while the sun is bright and shadow neatly drawn. These can be enormous beings.

The elementals of the standing stones arrive with night. Slim stone limbs moving upon joints of starlight and darkness, as if the stone were a carapace covering a void of stars.

These are the wild, old Horolognomon, unfamiliar with their long decay. The stones are not re-set and no one marks the hours, yet still they persist, marking out the fine divisions of the year with the turning of the stars, or the segments of the day with the movements of the sun. They are dangerous and mad.

Born from the stars and the sun they are imperious, inflexible and mighty in their wrath. Their time is wrong and no-one keeps it now, but made as they are from the interactions of eternal light, they cannot accept the truth. They have the pride of ancient gods.

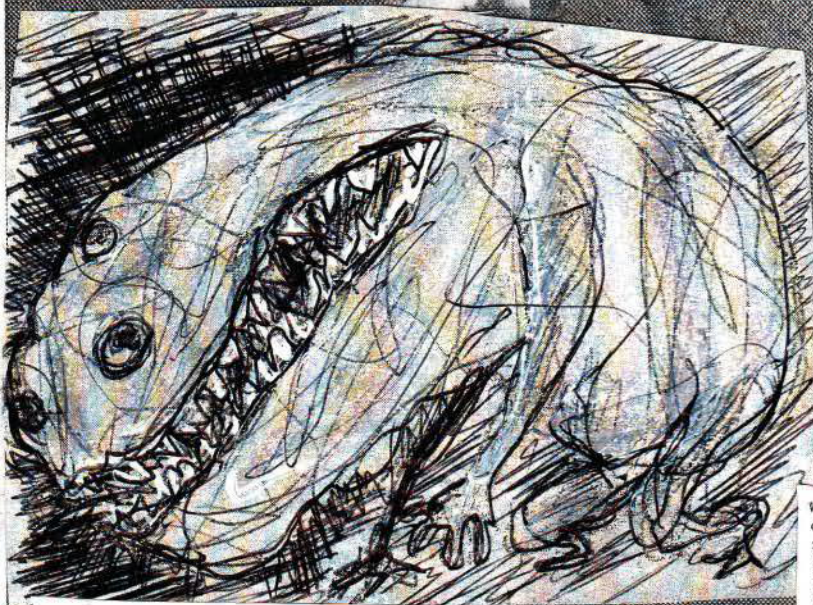
The sting of this Horolognomon can wipe someone from time, their webs are made of hours and days, to be trapped in them is to be lost in time.

HOSTAGE FROG

The Hostage Frog is about the size of two neatly built cows kneeling down. Half of its size is made up of its gigantic head and jaws. These truly are prodigious and come arrayed with an almost uncountable number of extremely sharp teeth.

The frog has two squinting atrous eyes glaring from the front of its face and one more, very primitive orb located bentrally on the top of its head. When it lies almost invisible under the caesious scum of a hidden swamp or pool the third eye, just breaching the surface, gives it a panoramic view

The frog is slick with slimy poiscns brewed within its noxious guts. Its intestines are a caustic nightmare, discomfoting even to the creature itself. In the melanic darkness of the muddy deep, it clenches its jaws and howls, tortured by cramps and abdominal knots. Here, alone, it broods upon its rage and malice. The only part of the frog not poisonous to the touch, is within its horrid mouth.



It wants specific foods. Things you cannot get inside a swamp. This seems reasonable at first. The food can be thrown into the frogs mouth. A brief glimpse of their friend, cramped, desperate and covered in porraceous slime, is proof of life But negotiation is a mistake, once the Frog knows how capable its victims are, its desires accelerate madly. It asks for more and more nightmarishly complex meals. These can be things from very far away, found and retrieved very quickly indeed. Fresh fruit, rare spices, spoilable milk. Sometimes civilised and expensive meals prepared by specific chefs, who must be abducted or paid off and transported to the swamp at speed. (How it came to know their names is not clearly understood, perhaps it listens in its mire to the Discretion Bugs who buzz around the swamp.) Others are simply

suicidal, Quarynx Steak, Pickled Hex Dragons, a Wound Whip in its brine.

The Hostage Frog will promise to release its captive after a certain number of meals. It sometimes does. There are tales enough of Frogs who kept their word to make co-operation seem worth while. There are certainly stories of attempts to outwit the frog, and the resulting mess when a hostage, poisoned and horribly dissolved is cut from out its side. The frog can be killed, but anyone swallowed is almost certain to die. If the chemical mess of its insides is pierced, the frog will certainly expire, but so will anything nearby as horrid poison surges out. And the Frog will go berserk, chopping and gnashing with its terrible jaws, wailing of betrayal, spraying mangled pieces of its hostage wide around.

While captive, the hostage must make do at they can. They can often steal pieces of the Frogs ransom, thrown in by their friends, snatching a few bites of a wedding cake or freshly baked loaf before throwing the rest down its throat. Perhaps a few gulps of excellent wine. At least the food is good.



The size of the Hostage Frogs mouth is probably intended to serve as storage space for big meals while it drifts through the long months of time and silence in the grimy watering holes and choloichrous murky ponds in which it lairs. But the creature is cunning and has found another use for its jaws, as a gaol.

The Hostage Frog will wait, then wait a little longer, for groups of thinking beings to near its hole. Then, as they get closer, it waits some more. (It is very good at waiting.) It will listen to them speak, and drift closer to the shoreline where they are, watching through its primitive eye. One will come to the water's edge, not just any one, a particular being. The frog is waiting for the highest in status, or the weakest, or simply someone it can neatly fit inside its mouth. Then, in a flurry of action it will leap from the water, snatch that person up and back into the swamp.

If escape or rescue is attempted, the Hostage Frog has a number of defences. It can be very difficult to get close using stealth or speed in the centre of its bog. Its sharp rows of teeth can bite off limbs that are reaching in or out. It's outer surface is toxic to the touch and, as a last resort, it can simply tip back its head, raise up its chin and open its throat. The hostage in its mouth can hear and smell and taste the toxic bog inside its guts and will usually beg mercy.

But the Hostage Frog does not want to eat the hostage. It wants almost everything else. It wants to LIVE, to taste the world denied it for so long. It hungers for the widest variety of the most beautiful foods known to mankind.

The fearful friends of the hostage, listening to their screams inside the frog will be its means. The Frog can speak, though it is a little unclear with a person in its mouth, and will threaten to swallow the hostage whole if its demands are not met.

In rare cases the Hostage Frog may have a previous victim still inside its mouth, someone or something small. Then both must share whatever is cast in. This can lead to a strange alliance indeed, with two utterly different groups dashing about the landscape looking for rare foods. These groups may betray each other, hoping to extend the life of their friend, or work together to outwit the frog. The Hostages may fight inside its mouth, quietly trying to strangle each other.

There are sad legends of very mighty people being lost inside a frog. Their power and wealth did not assist them. In fact it simply extended the length of their imprisonment as their servants and followers tried to satisfy the ever-more extravagant demands of the frog. (Though, the Caliph Amaranthine is said to have governed his kingdom from inside a Hostage Frog for several months as part of a plan to outwit his ambitious Vizier. One of a number of unlikely yet telling stories about that individual.)

The grinding of the teeth of the frog as it waits for its next meal is truly terrible to hear for everyone involved, including the frog. They are continuously hungry and carry a kind of rage against the world and all that is yet unconsumed. Perhaps they dream they will eat the world.

They almost always overreach in the end.

HYDRA-MORAY

Inexhaustible hunger and small multiple mouths that cannot chew combine to shape the savagery, and the care, of the Hydra-Moray, a simple, subtle, semi-aquatic predator that most people wish did not exist.

It is ferocious, a Hydra-relative whose heads, instead, are Moray Eels. It's body is a seals, or something like, with no rear legs and two blunt forelimbs that lever it up off the earth and let it slump along. From its shoulders and neck, project the heads of five to fifteen Moray Eels, sticking up to ten feet out, shifting constantly, interweaving and scenting the air where it dwells. They do not see well but smell keenly, especially in water or wave.

And down there its appearance shifts, the huge seal body hangs neatly in the blue, the whole propelled forwards in a sinuous arc, moving smoothly and with speed. The necks sometimes grouped, held together like a bouquet of mouths, moving as one, and sometimes spread out to smell and hunt, like a branches of a predatory tree.

Hungry is the Hydra-Moray, and extremely aggressive almost all of the time. It can only take small bites, and it never lets go with its jaws.

The Hydra-Moray's teeth are very sharp and its jaws are strong indeed, it has two sets per head. It can neither chew nor swallow, instead it keeps a second set of pharyngeal jaws inside its throat, which projects forwards into its mouth when it bites. As the eel attacks, this looks like a second, smaller mouth inside the first, reaching for its prey. These jaws grasp the meat or targeted flesh as well, pulling it into the throat as the mouth snaps shut. The Hydra-Moray cannot willingly release its grip, even in death. If an Eel is swiped off with a sword mid-bite, it stays latched on till carefully pried off. The jaws of the Eels are so strong that there are very few selections of any living thing that it can grip, which it cannot also nip right off.

If it does grab hold of something that it cannot swallow down, that head will be trapped, it will slowly sicken and die, eventually cannibalised by the rest.

The thing must take enormous care with what it eats. It must master its hunger and rage and wait. It must work to overcome the poor sight of its eyes, to listen and smell, to attack the extremities first. On land, it must secure its escape, never going far from a river or pool. The combination of ferocity, care and hive-like awareness of its numerous heads, makes the Hydra-Moray quite difficult to fight. It will hold heads in reserve, sacrificing some to pin down limbs, keeping one back to go for the throat. In battle it will fearlessly bite off its own trapped heads to prevent it from being pinned down. It learns to avoid armour, to attack from the rear or hunt from under water, leaping in a surge of spray, pulling outliers down to drown in gloom stained with their billowing blood.

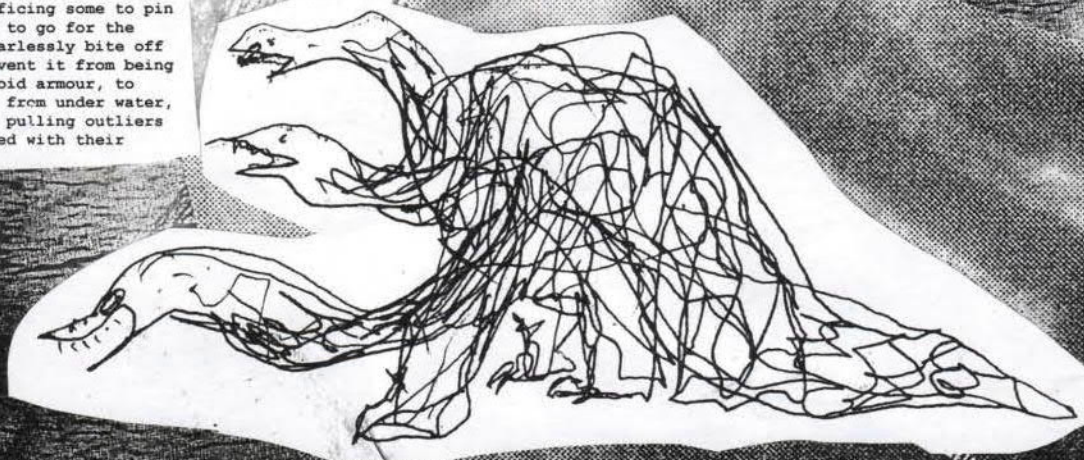
The skin of the Hydra-Moray is swathed in oily mucus, making it hard to wrestle or restrain. Still worse: the slime is toxic to the touch, causing paralysis and internal wracks.

As a final grim addition, any head cut off will come straight back as two more separate heads. In the long term they battle for dominance, one will eat the other over time, bringing back the total to its customary number of necks, but in the short term, both will assault whatever they can find in defence of the whole.

There is no theoretical limit to the number of heads it can grow, but it can only manage so

many. Young heads have not yet learned to function as part of a whole. If two thirds of the Hydra-Morays heads are new, the government of its senses will collapse. Hydra-Anarchy will ensue, the heads will frantically attack each other, biting on and refusing to let go. The beast will inflict massive damage on itself and usually be open to attack. Stabs to the body can finish it off. Most Hydra-Moray will attempt retreat before it loses and re-grows too many heads.

It can live and thrive in seas, freshwaters and on land, but must be fully submerged for several hours a day or its toxic skin will dry and crack, causing it terrible pain.



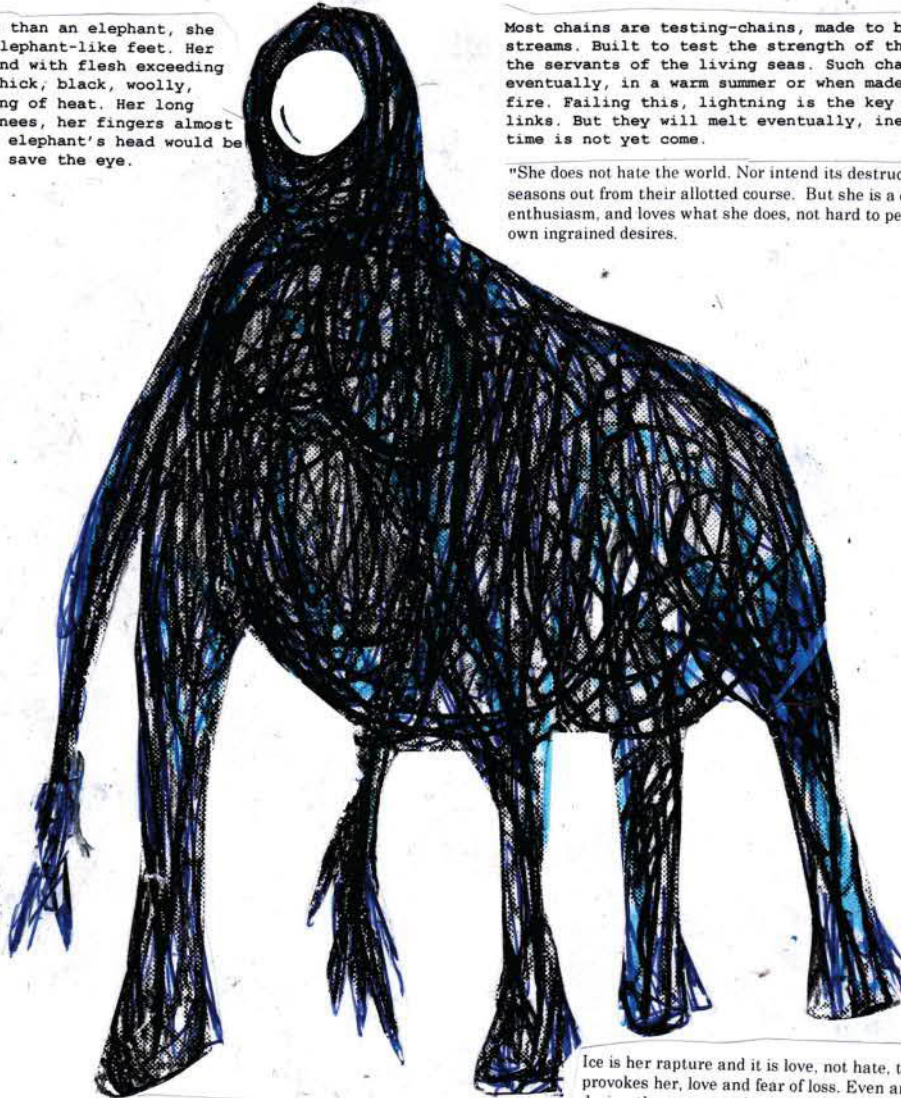
ICE AGE EYE

"I named her, knowing at once that she was a sentry, or observer for an un-suspected distant age of Ice, hidden in deep time." -Leptoblast

There may be only one, rarely seen, making long looped pilgrimages from out the icy zones, seeking limits yet to be found. It may be the same individual, scattered a little through time like dust on a page, or a handful, or a herd, distantly arranged in adjacent epochs and unconnected continents. They are rarely seen and always singly so, one at a time.

The Ice Age Eye is large, bigger than an elephant, she walks, slowly and with care on elephant-like feet. Her body is robust indeed. Wide, round with flesh exceeding dense. The fur of the beast is thick, black, woolly, prized very highly for its holding of heat. Her long hands reach down to around her knees, her fingers almost trail along the ground. Where an elephant's head would be is a round dome, without feature save the eye.

The eye is white.



The blank white gaze of the Ice Age Eye expands and narrows like a pupil facing bars of shade and light. The head turns back and forth, a lazy but attentive surveyor, noting everything she sees. The Ice Age Eye will amble into canyons simply to look at the walls, she will turn over huge but irrelevant rocks to see what's underneath, she will stop to look at single flowers. She takes account of everything.

The eye is terror in a storm. Those who have met its gaze describe a depthless landscape, inverse, eternal, falling endlessly away or a roaring storm of ice without end, or a doorway to a world of frozen death. They say there is another world inside, looking at this one, waiting for it to die.

The effect of her gaze is always the same. It squeezes the fire at the core of the heart. For anything that has a beating heart, looking into the eye causes that heart to slow. Leading more usually to sleep than death, as the gaze-meeter blacks out, they close their eyes and their heart skips into life.

Even if the gaze is not directly met, its touch still chills. The engine of combustion slows. Fire shrinks to a torch, to torch to a candleflame, the candle to a spark, the spark goes out.

The eye may open very wide and bring forth chains. Huge and delicate slim fingers reach into the white void, as if it were a gaping mouth, and tease out a rolling tongue; linked chains of ice. Sometimes huge blue-black links the width of wrists, to bind up rivers, lakes and seas, freezing them in place, or tiny spiderworks to lock unfolding flowers. A fallen leaf is not beneath her notice, nor a world-girdling sea beyond her reach.

Most chains are testing-chains, made to bind rivers and streams. Built to test the strength of the warm lands and the servants of the living seas. Such chains will melt, eventually, in a warm summer or when made subject to fire. Failing this, lightning is the key to break their links. But they will melt eventually, inevitably: their time is not yet come.

"She does not hate the world. Nor intend its destruction, or to bend its seasons out from their allotted course. But she is a creature of slow enthusiasm, and loves what she does, not hard to persuade towards her own ingrained desires.

Ice is her rapture and it is love, not hate, that makes the chains. Love provokes her, love and fear of loss. Even an annihilating waste can know desire, the storm can love what it destroys, an eye into an age of ice can still see beauty, strange and inexplicable to it, to love the growing leaf or rivers flow must seem perversion to her, but, sometimes, she does. These chains can be so strong and hard to break that only by the deepest Art, or the will of the Ice Age Eye itself, can they be undone.

Little sympathy is borne by her towards the fire, or small, quick thinking, quick acting living beings which, from her perspective, are simply temporary mistakes. Avatar of some ancient sovereignty, now sleeping, waiting to return. Sending out its scouts and sentries, walking the earth, testing the rivers and seas, prospecting, planning the glaciers and encompassing sheets of ice, measuring the strength of the fire at the heart of the world." - Leptoblast

IMPERATOR

APE

or EAGLE-APE



The tales of the Emperor Ape, or 'Eagle-Ape' are so like violent fictive dreams that many have assumed them to be so, and sought the beast expecting something less than was described.

Few who have, return, and the stories of survivors have only added to the trail of dead.

The Emperor prefers deciduous hilly woodlands where the shadows gather thickly in the trees. In the gloom between the branches, its azuline down seems darker, almost black. Only in direct sunlight can the beautiful sky-and-petal blue of its small and downy feathers be observed.

It lairs either at the highest point, or in some dominant and overawing feature of the land. A tall and lightning-twisted tree, a black and looming crag, a spire of impossible rock. If the forest has a landmark it is there and over time the name of the land and the nature of the Ape will be tangled up together in the warnings and the stories of that most tragic zone.

Here it nests and keeps a careful watch against the trespass of its realm.

The Emperor stands nine or ten feet high, from its bent and apelike legs to its shoulders, sloped and corded enormously with muscle, tightening into chains of strength towards its arms and hands. Its body is like that of a gigantic ape. It climbs well and swings easily through the trees, should they support its weight, most branches are too thin. More usually it employs its incredible explosive strength to jump directly, and almost silently, from trunk to trunk above the ground. It can knuckle-run across the forest floor at the speed of a cantering horse, a little faster over open ground.

Its 'fur' is down. Feathers, very small and closely arranged. (If you could stroke an Emperor Ape and live, it would feel very soft.). Through these grow a smattering of longer, hairlike feathers in testaceous red. They are sparse enough to be almost-invisible against the blue, but, when the creature is aroused, they rise. Light catches, bestowing on the Ape an almost-halo, glowing red.

The feathers around its head are utterly matte black. Its huge square-ended beak is also black. Its tongue and inner throat are black. Its eyes are like an eagle's eyes, but black of iris, black of pupil and with no surrounding white. From afar the head of the Emperor seems like a featureless black axe, relentless and blind.

Its sight is famed. "Should the creature spy you, from however far away, if you cross even one toe into lands it claims, it will race towards you like an arrow, stopping for no fear or force, and tear you apart with the speed of the wind." - Leptoblast.

From its perch the Emperor can see, clearly and in detail, everything the light will show. There is no distance-limit on its sight other than the clouds, the night and the horizons edge.

It regards its chosen territory with a fanaticism beyond that of any other natural beast.

"To the Emperor, space, is mind. Within its world it is the only true living thing. Nothing else can be. To trespass in its world is to trespass in its mind, to be an unwanted thought. Thusly it destroys without remorse that which it knows cannot be: any other living thing." - Zenithal

The size and strength of the Emperor Ape are small matters compared to its overwhelming ferocity. It fears absolutely nothing under any circumstances and is almost impossible to stop.

The Ape employs its hands, feet, body and beak with an explosive and aggressive force. It strikes like a knife fighter gone berserk, producing impacts of such speed and power and mass combined, that they have been known to snap the necks of armoured warriors who took the blow upon their prepared shield. Its beak can tear through any armour made by mortal hands.

Attacks and blows hammer down with such relentless speed that few living things can reliably survive the rain of harm. Even creatures very much larger than the Emperor, a fully-grown Griseous Boa Constructor for example, will often willingly leave its territory to avoid the uncertain result of such a battle.

Attempts to crack the creature through its mind, quelling its spirit or its drives by Subtle Art, have always failed. Those who try report an overriding will and self-belief that shines like an arrow of burning gold. Irreducible and unstoppable.

The coat of the Emperor is the most valuable in existence. It has been recovered, whole, on only three recorded occasions. The two remaining coats are kept securely as regalia for the crowned heads of opposing states. Every other attempt has ended in death, or in a coat so torn to shreds it can no-longer be identified at all.

The Emperor cannot be tamed, enslaved, persuaded or subdued. So it is claimed. But returning a live specimen to Jukai Turret Prime is one of the Seven Theoretical Conditions in which the constitution of that city may be changed Without Reprove.

JUKAI CITY

It may be that the spores exist everywhere, waiting for the return of the ancient world that shaped them before allowing themselves again to feed and grow.

Jukai bay is fed by many rivers, most notably the Or, running through the Melanic Moors like a thread of gold in black silk. The Perse and Virid also end their journeys there, slowing into sandy archipelagos before they reach the bay.

Each brings some strange combination of taints, soaked up when passing through their shaping lands. The shallow waters of the bay evaporate quickly, making it a dense, strange chemical stew about four to sixteen feet deep, glimmering chlorochrous under the high sun. Out where the riverwater fades into the surrounding sea, are the Reefs of Chrome, gleaming aurulent, formed by altered coral from the strange substance of Jukai. And in the centre of the bay: the black, burning towers of the city itself. Black, Silver and Greenish-Gold still make up the heraldry of Jukai and any house or faction of that place can make their symbol only with those three.

The first records name the towers as black mounds, just poking from the bay. Primitive tribes found that the waters of Jukai stained the hulls of their canoes dead-black. Once on the islands, settlers were safe from the enormously numbered terrors, animal and unearthly, that filled the strange surrounding lands. There was no food or water, except what could be brought, but there was safety on the black, crackling mounds, textured like scabs, and they were warm and shivered in the night.

Man learnt the calcinating aspects of the waters of the bay. The chlorochrous stew of Jukai impregnates textured materials with a black encrustation, like pumice or black limestone, brittle, light and strong. A fabric, or woven mat, left overnight emerges black, solid and textured like a scab, resistant to heat or cold, strong enough to build a wall and secrete enough to cut or carve. With this, those tribes began the first simple shelters of Jukai and built the first black canoes with which they reached the Reefs of Chrome.

The mounds grew. They widened slowly over generations, but their height grew faster, noticeable even in a single life. Sometimes they shivered and quaked as the pressure of the thing within forced the inner cavity to breach. One day the tip of the tallest mound sparked, a tiny red flame emerged, no bigger than a match-head at first. The tribes of Jukai now had fire as well, and small towers from which to view the surrounding lands and the seas beyond the Reefs of Chrome.

Centuries drifted as they grew, mounds to hills, hills to village to towers to town, the black shapes slowly building from within, each lit by a separate-coloured fire upon its peak. Homes and fortresses were hung, the first bridges built between the self-assembling towers.

The people of Jukai were poor, but very safe. No invader could easily reach them across the bay, or climb the black towers in which they dwelt. Here at a far unbidden corner of the world they slowly built and thrived.

Then came the docks. The leaders of Jukai essayed enormous risk, both financial and physical, Jukai became briefly home to an engineer of monstrous size. A Griseous Boa Constructor curled around the reefs of Chrome and began construction of Jukai's first deepwater dock. Carved into the coral of the reef, reinforced and with a tidal gate.

For the first time the Chrome docks made Jukai easily accessible to the outside world. And with Jukai, the strange surrounding lands, distant and effectively cut off for so long, home to untold wondrous forms of life and treasures strange. From the Docks of Chrome, explorers could take the Black Canoes to Jukai itself, from there they could travel up the Or into the Melanic Moors and what lies beyond, or take the Perse into the Citrine Hills, the Virid to the Pyrrhous Plains, see the forest of Rhodopsin, Aun: town of Rumours or any of the storied lands which still await.

With movement and the trade came wealth, and power, Jukai City was born.

The Second-Born of the families of Jukai, know that inside each spire is an impossibly huge being, slowly growing and waiting to emerge, that their city and their culture is a shell. They know one day a cycle will complete and the gods will break free from their chrysalis. If anyone else knows this at all, they give no sign.

On the day that they come forth to walk the earth, the city beings will be amazed to find the world (to them) freezing poisoned waste, and will die slowly of starvation and disease, but not before they stride the land as impossible gods laying waste in wrath and madness to Jukai.

Until that day, Jukai city stands.

The bay is waded easily at low tide, but the thick alkali waters slowly burn and poison living things. Fish do not swim there, birds do not land there. There is no form of life except for man, and what man brings.

KINDERGNAW.

Hate them on sight, for they hate you.

All who see the Kindergnaw dislike it and feel that they are meant to dislike it. They daydream of causing its death and choking off the hate which fills it to the brim. They don't. They should.

A troubling bat-hominid, bipedal, with wings, an exceedingly round face and a dangerous manic grin. Its head holds a pair of ears, exceedingly sharp and tall. The Kindergnaw is black and the size of a child.

Malice makes them, mischief shapes, and cruelty is their meal. Fine servants they are, and cheap, lending assistance to any so long as they may hurt. Small, and not strong, but cunning, immortal and invulnerable to harm by mortal hands. With sharp teeth. Only magic makes an end of them or damages their flesh. And only on flesh, on living flesh, may they feed at all.

Each Kindergnaw is cursed, and each curse, or code of life, is shaped a different way. It binds the creature and compels it. They may not break it, to do so even once is death. The curses turn to justice, or fairness, right action and decent conduct. For instance; a Kindergnaw may be cursed to feed 'only in defence of the weak' or 'only on those who abuse their powers'. This bond of action limits the feeding of the beast. To no avail. They starve, and rage, and plan and scheme. In every case the result is much the same. The hateful

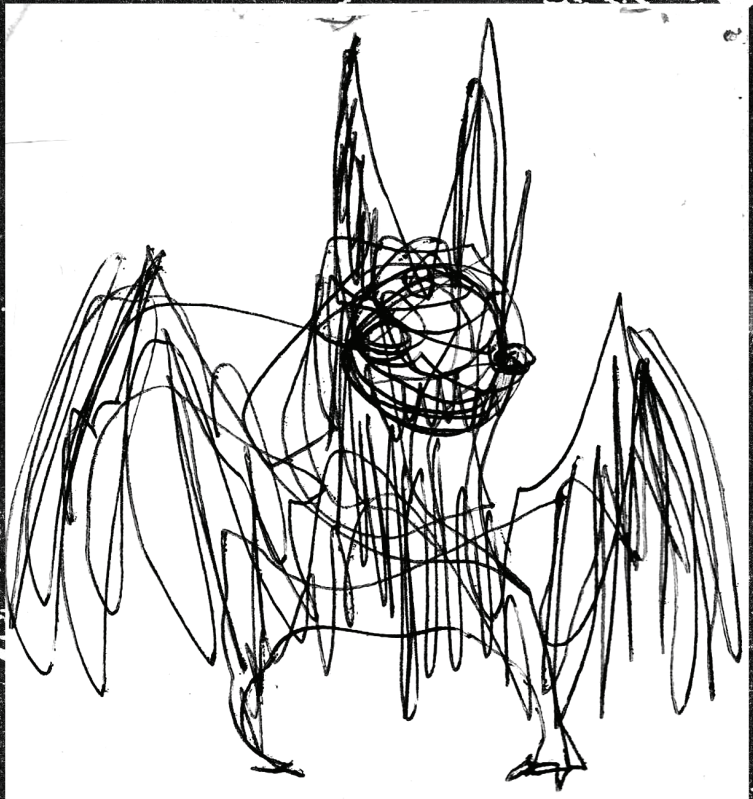
Kindergnaw flits back and forth in the night, seeking out secrets and shame, telling tales, inflating wrongs and actively causing the cruelty it was cursed to amend.

They seek out the oppressed and whisper of wealth, of the prideful and privileged lives of those who rule and mock, tempting them into revenge. They roost upon the roofs of bullied children or beaten wives, speaking secretly of violence and contempt. Always in the night they come, privately, concealing their presence from all but one, whom they torment. These people cannot run. The Kindergnaw does not want to rescue them, it wants them to seek revenge. Through it. Once the order is given, the Kindergnaw will fly gleefully into the night, or break into the house, bite up the bully, gobble the mayor consume the violent husband over hours. But then they will come back.

Once its target succumbs to the Kindergnaw's promises and lets it feed, tales of their choice will soon find their way to those affected by their deed. The brothers of a husband eaten in the night will hear whispers of the curse his wife put on him, the parents of a bully child taken from his bed, will hear about his victim strutting through town the next day. The Kindergnaw will visit them and offer them revenge.

Kindergnaws will ride the cycle of loss and revenge for as long as they can. They are extremely clever and difficult to catch, though they may be temporarily driven off from, for instance, a sad and bullied boy, they will not forget him and the middle aged man that boy becomes will one day hear a whispering outside his window in the night, reminding him of old wrongs, or new ones recently suffered. The more petty and vindictive someone is the more Kindergnaws they will attract. In rare cases, huge flocks can gather. It is rumoured that the city of Nyctopolis was almost fully de-populated by a murmuration of Kindergnaws.

But this is fanciful.



LUNARAPTOR

The Lunaraptors lope crazily across the plains, eyes rolling in their heads, the scales of madness flowing endlessly across their sides. Occasionally you hear a 'thump' as one falls over then clambers to its feet and joins the rest.

The creatures are bipedal lizard-things, yet unlike any kind of lizard known. Similar, instead, to the rumoured contents of long-preserved abandoned isles where the creatures of a latter age live on.

They are taller than a man, with strong legs and smaller hooked hands held before the breast like a spinster clutching wool. The heads are fearsome, huge toothed mouths with jaws designed to tear and rend.

"The racing, rending body of the Lunaraptor, so clearly shaped for acts of harm, threatens speed, ferocity and danger in the extreme. Its behaviour, however, is laughably inconsistent with its flesh. They are ridiculous and futile things, not, I think, a true species at all but some diseased or degenerate strain lingering through the trickle of its extinction." - **Leptoblast**.

"A relic, not a fragment of a larger whole. This is the core species, careful observation makes it clear. Scaled, in the manner of the crocodile. Scales that seem to move. Unstable in thickness, position and shape. The surface of a scaled sea, at night, under a bright moon. A slow wind against the scales, pushing them hither and yon. Causing them to grow, separate, spread out and recombine like clouds. This movement of scales across the skin is fast enough that, if observed closely, it can be measured with the naked hand. (Such agonising patience I have shown!)

I left them after only a few months, half driven mad. Incoherent Swine! These creatures are the product of no natural scheme or cause. Not only that they behave strangely. They have no pattern-of-action. Of all living beings I have observed, they are the only ones in whom time and change have worked no regularity at all. The Lunaraptor will do simply anything. They will hunt, flee, approach, climb trees, dance, dig furrows in the ground, watch stars, try to gnaw down trees, excrete, come towards human beings waving their arms and gnashing their huge jaws in a parody of speech, roll around in the dirt, stand on one leg, try to swim, sleep, or any one of a hundred ridiculous things. They will do all this in no particular pattern or plan. The one rule is: they tend to stay together. Other than that all is chaos, perfect chaos!

As to the relative safety of being near a Lunaraptor: they are utterly unpredictable. Even inconceivable.

I have never seen them breed, neither did I ever see one harmed by direct force.

A strange aspect of their madness. Immunity to deliberate strike. Attacks by sword, arrow, hammer, pick and mace, weapons of every known kind, simply glance off the shifting scales of the Lunaraptors hide. The more closely observed a blow, the less harm it does. I confess, I did experience a moment of fugue. After several months amongst the Lunaraptors, at the end of a long day, on witnessing some typically deranged and senseless exhibition (I forget what it was), I lost my head. I ran amongst them, verbally condensing my upset into a series of high, sharp sounds. I flailed madly at them with a pick, intending to do harm. The blows glanced off. I knew they would. The Lunaraptors rolled on their backs like dogs and, eyes wide, formed a counter clockwise spiral on the ground. I sank weeping to my knees. I threw the pick away. And this blow struck.

Now I suspect that it is directed harm that will not strike a Lunaraptors hide. Undirected harm, indifferent, blind or not observed, may work. They seem to fear fire and drowning, as well as falling. I have not the Subtle Art or would experiment with its Fires.

I have been lead to wonder then. Since these creatures seem to neither breed nor easily die. Since they have no aged or young amongst them. If they are not, perhaps entirely original beings. Immortal, unassailable, insane, impervious to life and time?

They have in their movements and the staring of their eyes, something I have seen in the soldiers of forgotten wars. I wonder, what cataclysm would be so great to alter such a creature so? How long have they been thus?" - **Ashkott**

KROGOR

Krogors eat people and seek them in the night. The first warning you may have could be a glass-clad limb kicking down the wall or tearing off the roof; a glass-masked face of meat with ape's square teeth reaching down inside to gulp you up. They will lope silently through the starlit streets snapping up those who run.

Unbottled Krogors are never seen. It's possible some world exists where they roam free, wearing their own skins. When they come here, it's in a skin of glass.

The Krogor is huge, the size of a small elephant, but more slender of limb. It moves lightly and quickly, stepping soundlessly over the dark earth like a gigantic long-limbed dog. The wide-muzzled hyena-head is directly set without a neck to intervene. An ape's square teeth. On its shoulders and the upper spine, the skin bunches and spikes, rubbing against the glass in sharp and ruffled furrows. Perhaps with its skin on, it has a ridge of bristled fur, or quills.

The glass covering will split around the teeth for the Krogor to take its prey.

The strange beauty of the Krogor is the sheen of its transparent shell of glass, slower and smoother and stronger than skin. The Krogor runs and even leaps;

reaching incredible speeds as it bounds smoothly on its long legs, but it accelerates slowly and takes time to stop, it must ease itself in and out of speed. Its movements are somnambulant and vague. If it jumps it leaves the ground for a little too long. The glass is pearlescent and gleams beneath the stars. Krogors come at night and fear the day. The sunlight upsets them, skinless as they are and when it rains upon the glass the water slows and cascades off in long slow sheets, like a silk dress falling to the ground.

The stars rippling in its convexities, its slow somnambulant indifference, the stretching of its tendons, the movements of its muscles and the endless shiftings of its flesh, cast a transfixing rapture, like a nightmare brought to life. A sight hypnotic, which can freeze observers for a vital second that they could have used to run away.

"It was a flat black pool upon the mountain's top: a Tarn. The night was cloudless and the stars reflected in the tarn like gleaming pins. They grew, each point of light expanded slowly, joining with the rest until the pool itself was full of light. The Krogor climbed slowly forth and made its call.

"Krogor!"

A long low moan from deep inside the chest, vibrating through the glass. I was transfixed, but hidden still, the only sign was a pale pennant of starlight catching in my clouding breath. I cupped my hands and breathed through them in shallow pants while my heart hammered in my chest. The Krogor waited. Then from some distant mountain came another call, faint to me, but clear.

"Krogor ... Krogor ... Krogor"

Then another, and again. The creature stepped silently and smoothly down the hill, down to the plains where it would hunt and kill. - Zenithal

Krogors know what harms them and avoid it if they can. They solve problems and dodge traps. They are careful and aware, as they must be with a skin of glass. The pearly glass that makes the Krogor's hide is much tougher than earthly glass, but shares some of its vulnerabilities. It is hard to cut or scratch, but can be smashed. A hammer does more damage than a knife's keen edge. Those workers of the Subtle Art who influence by touch have found that touching the Krogor's sheeny skin will not affect it in the least. Yet to those who work through light or rays the Krogor is vulnerable indeed. Fires can harm it with their heat, and if large enough, can boil it alive, but it feels little and is impaired neither by trauma nor by pain up until the point where the glass breaks.

When exposed directly to air, a Krogor blackens and burns without heat or flame. The flesh darkens and chars, the blood boils into a cool blue steam. If only a single crack appears, the Krogor howls in agony as the air touches its naked skin, it flees immediately, heading for the closest mountain top. If the shell of glass is smashed it goes berserk and twists like bacon in the pan. An awful and regretful sight.

A berserk Krogor destroys everything it can, spraying its burning blue-grey blood and razor-sharp fragments of glass. The boiling Krogor blood is cool and does no harm, but turns to soft blue steam that has a soporific effect.

After its madness has past and the beast has finally died, the corpse of the Krogor is dangerous still. Its heart is burning in its chest and its arteries are boiling to a critical point. A minute or so after its death the blackened corpse explodes, scything down anything nearby in a radiating wave of broken glass.

YORN OWLS

The Yorn owls, named for the forest of Yorn, named itself for the god who died there and from whom the black trees grew. Dark were the dreams of Yorn and dark the trees and darker still the Owls who flit between their branches in the night.

Yorn owls are three feet high or more, grey-faced with eyes like gold infections infiltrating coal. Black their feathers are, darker than the night almost, black on black like stains of ink upon a black cats back. Only when their faces turn and catch the light, or when they spread their wings in flight can they be clearly seen. But still not heard. Yorn Owls step silently and rarely move, in flight they make no sound. The grey down of their under-wings muffles even the movement of air. A flag shifting gently on a still summer day makes more commotion than a Yorn owls swoop. They could be right above you now, criss-crossing in the dark.

Silent are the Yorn owls, except for the single word they know, and watchful and aware. Sharp, their talons are, each inches long, and strong the claws that swoop upon you from the dark. A Yorn owl plummets like a brick being thrown at the base of the skull from the top of a tree, landing where the shoulders meet the neck. The talons bite, the prey goes dead, Yorn owls don't stay for long, they kill and leave.

Yorn Owls are intelligent, they understand your words yet speak but one themselves. The one word known to that whole race, the only one they ever speak: the name of Yorn. The owls make of this single name, the silences between it, its intonation and the movements of their head and wings, a basic medium of speech amongst themselves. They know each other well and work in tribes, there is a Parliament of the Owls, though few have seen it and no speeches there are made, except for the one cry of "Yorn".

Instead the Yorn owls sit in silence and attend upon a government of Subtle Art.



If a Yorn owl, watching from its perch, sees a spell and hears it cast, it can speak the name of Yorn and cast the spell again. Each owl can only recall one spell at a time, and they must see it done. No two owls can memorize the same spell if they see it cast, only the strongest, the cleverest or the closest can. It is a dream snatched out of the air. They cannot make spells on their own, or transmit them, most cannot use a spell more than once a day. But there is little of that Art they cannot learn.

The owls use these magics to communicate with each other. They manipulate the spell to form messages. An illusion is used to represent a clever plan, a magic mouth may speak a proposed law, a dancing rope may spell out other words. The Yorn owls are inventive in the extreme. Whichever owls command the fluent spells are rated first and rule the rest. Therefore Yorn owls hunger for contact with illusionists and the readers of minds, these magics can be turned to grand media of the owls. An owl that can show others visions in a spell gains power. One who can merely blow things up or summon fogs or raise the dead is less well respected by the rest, they are sent to haunt the forest of Yorn and uphold the midnight empire of the owls.

In the forest of Yorn, or any place where Yorn owls come in force, nothing lives or moves at night unless they give it leave. There are no predators of any kind except the owls. The trunks are bare, the dark-grey trees spread green-black leaves upon their intermeshing crowns, but further down nothing reaches out to catch the Yorn owl in its flight. At night they swoop and spin between the trees at speed. Or watch silently from the distant crowns.

By day none of this applies. While the sun is in the sky, anything can enter the forest of Yorn and do there (almost) what it wills. Some of the more intelligent predators make lairs outside the forests edge and hunt there in the day. So long as they leave before the sun has left the sky - they will be safe.

As evening comes, the black shapes of the Yorn owls can be seen emerging from their nests, gathering in the dark crowns like spots of deeper darkness, heralds of the night, watching and waiting for their empire to begin. Someone who sees the sun set at the forest's edge would be surprised to see a wolf, a fox, atrocious crows, all exiting at speed before the dark comes on. Once day flees and till it wanders back, the forest is the owls.

Yorn Owls travel far to seek out spells to learn, far from the forest of Yorn. The more an owl can overhear, the greater chance it has of learning one of those most-valued spells that give it status amongst other owls. Some make alliance with the workers of the Subtle Art, some simply war upon them without cause. It makes no difference to the Yorn Owl how it hears its spell.

Wherever they migrate, if they have the numbers and the power, they institute their empire of night.

More recently a bold adaptation has taken place: the urban Yorn owl. The owls have good reason to seek closeness to mankind, the chief source of their magics. But the owls desire for domination during the hours of darkness is a hunger they cannot set aside. This leads to brutal conflicts, silent midnight wars wherever the two species overlap. At night the owls hold the advantage, striking silently from the darkened sky, and the Subtle Art of man is quickly countered, whatever spells are used, the owls can use them back. And this may sometimes be the only reason for the war at all.

But there are some places in the human world so chaotic and bereft of law, that even a government of predatory owls is an improvement. In the slum-towers of Jukai, and perhaps the slums of other cities, the Yorn owls bring an unexpected peace to night. For the first time the weak and defenceless can sleep safely in their beds knowing that no-one will assault them in their sleep, that no criminal, or even the forces of corrupt law will come for them at night. They are completely safe. So long as they do not leave their home. Under any circumstances. People say the Yorn owls can't be bribed. But they still hang gifts of mice or voles upon their doors at night, just to be sure.

Yorn Owl feathers are popular with thieves, nobles and pretty much anyone who isn't a Yorn owl. They absorb minor sounds and those who wear a cloak of Yorn owl down go silently indeed. And must hope the Yorn owls never know.

MEDICTOR

"The East! Where spice-crammed caravels drift slowly through the rivers vast sustaining coils, rolling in infuscate gleams under a tyrannous sun! Where Indigo trees crowd the bright hills, and happy peasant girls pick the Vermille Worm from burnished Jessel leaf with silver tongues. Where sweating cities squirm with overwhelming life! Where naked Oligarchs lounge and sweat on cushions of mouldering silk, cooled by nubile slaves with silken fans. Yes, the mysterious and unknown east! From thence comes the Medictor, strangest of its breed." - Leptoblast

The Medictor's form is something like that of the Medusa, but affecting a species unrelated to man. The base body is a human-sized slug standing upwards on its tail. The torso-colour is of Pearl, not matte-grey but shining, sometimes translucent, marked or scored with swirls or vectored lines of unknown source. Its hands are simple, its face one of distracted charm. Like the Medusa: always female but with hair of non-dangerous snakes in a state of rapture or whispering fugue. An alien beauty.

"Here! Here in the cities of the Merchant-Lords where flags of finest multi-coloured silk hang limply in the listless heat, or spring forth like drawn blades in the wild wet wind of the oncoming monsoon! Where perfumed hands count coins of octagonal gold, torn from tombs and fingers of bone! Here they live, a race of intelligent aristocrat slugs! Of all that caste-riven nation, the highest and most sacred. There they grimly smoke from golden pipes the nightmare Herbs of Thaum, and see within the tangled webs of unfolding air the patterns of their plots and endless schemes. Does the fabled rare Medictor spring from that decadent stock? Or merely counterfeit their form? No man can say." - Leptoblast

"She saw that I (not uncommonly, being familiar with the tales of the Medusa) was nervous of her gaze, and was quite considerate in her attempts to put me at my ease. She handed me a drink and mentioning the closeness of the crowd (more for my welfare than hers, she seemed quite enlivened by the vibrancy of scent and sound) she led me to a balcony where a light curtain of Oriflamme separated us from the party. Here we could look over the waters of Jukai and see the golden strands of the Or weaving its way into the darkness of the Melanic Moors. She enquired very considerably of my position and welfare, and on learning that I was, or aspired to be, a Natural Philosopher, she warmly accepted my numerous queries without any sense of tiredness or irritation.

She informed me that her ability to create life applied only to statues of living things, that it usually applied only to stone and that it took some effort on her part. She was not at all certain if it would work on the black pseudo-stone of Jukai. Apparently such creatures act simply as they would in life although she did admit 'they might bear me some affection'.

Her third eye was closed and she asked, I think teasingly, if I would wish to hear my fate. I must confess that I was quietly intimidated by the possibility, however, after due consideration, I decided that as I seek'd to claim the path of knowledge as my own, it was not for me to decide which data were either of danger or irrelevance. 'There is no bad knowledge' I said inwardly and agreed that I would hear her fortune. She thanked me, told me not to worry and opened her third eye.

A remarkable transformation took place. Her snakes, which until now had seemed languorous and tired, stood straight up from her head as if shocked. A susurus filled the air, like the murmurs of a distant crowd. I realised that each snake was speaking, in a quiet low hissing voice. Though nearly overwhelmed by the strangeness of the situation I began to grasp that each snake was describing a series of events, in the third person, like someone relating a half-remembered story.

The subject of the story was a 'she'. It was almost impossible to discern what 'she' might be doing at any point. Several of the strands seemed to conflict, some mentioning journeys in one direction, others in another, some mentioning matters of great personal sensitivity (which I will not relate here but suffice to say that no field of human activity was ignored) others seeming quite dry and professional.

I realised that these stories were my own, that all were somehow, or could be, true.

I remained stunned, (I regret I am not certain of the time), until I realised that one of the snakes had stopped whispering and had curled back to sleep. I understood what this must mean. That story had ended, and ended soon. Before another snake slept after recollection I gathered my courage and reached out to touch the smooth pearl of her skin. It was warm, unlike a slug, and very soft. Her two primary eyes refocused on me, she seemed to come out of a trance. At first she smiled at me in a most intimate and dreamy way, we remained there for a few moments, my hand upon her shoulder and her gaze searching mine. She must have seen something in my expression, her third eye closed, the snakes fell quiet and slept. Thankfully I did not hear too much." - Zenithal

An individual can possess many fates, the crowd has but a few. And so Medictors can give the futures, not of people, but of states. If allowed to look upon a mighty throng within one view, each snake will whisper, not alternate futures for a single name, but true predictions for a general mass. Brought to a hill or a tall tower, the Medictor will look upon the city as a whole. Each section of a cities life may be addressed: trade, crime, art, faith, the rich and poor. The highest ranking members of each aspect gather round and listen carefully for the snake that whispers what will come for them.

A city with Medictor in residence will often know good fortune as its rulers use their knowledge of its future path. Cities compete strongly in tempting and persuading a Medictor to reside within their bounds. All kinds of subterfuge and espionage are used, except of course, against the Medictor herself.

"The semi-mythical and much-admired ability of a Medictor to bring the heroic statuary of an ancient city to life, thereby preserving it in times of war, is vastly overrated. Consider for a moment the enormous cost of carving lifelike soldiers from stone, in comparison to that of simply training and equipping living men. The creatures, once imbued with life, possess only those qualities they are shown with in their sculpted form. A mighty hero shown lifting an enormous rock will certainly be very strong, but, other than that, they will simply be a man of flesh and blood. A mythic beast shown breathing fire will still do so, but how is it to be made loyal or controlled? The same is true of any other unnatural beast. The poetical vision of a nation fighting alongside its own heroic past is all very well for the writers of fiction or the illustrators of fairy tales, but think of the relative costs and poor chance of success!"

- Ashkott.

If a perfect statue of a single person is carved in utter darkness, so that its stone eyes never see another being, and if a Medictor should bring it to life in the presence of that person only and none else, then when questioned it will speak the true and single future of that one. But this would require a sculptor of extraordinary skill, one who can work in the dark from touch alone. Perhaps one blind, or one forced to blindness. And when the thing is done, and the ritual complete, other than the Medictor, only one person ever leaves the darkened room where it is done. Where is the copy? Or if the copy lives, where is the first?

If a Medictor dies violently, every statue of a living thing in a miles radius will spring into life and go mad with rage."

MEREMAIDS

The Mermaids are pale and still and hang like the bodies of the dead in the vault of dark water where it arches into the open sky.

They are unlike Mermaids in several ways. They have the tails of eels, not fish, and seem younger than a woman, like a teenager or child. They are slender even for that, almost famine-thin. Though both are only other forms of life that only look like human beings.

The eel-tail is long and coloured in the same glaucous green-grey, their human skin is very pale. Their hair is dark but skin and hair are almost always stained with mud and grime. The Mermaids root continually in the silt of the riverbed or mere.

They love still water. Not-quite-stagnant but almost unruffled pools and bays where the cambers loose their surge and water oozes past slower than a deep breath. There they can dig their grimy holes below the banks. The slowness of the force and the long decay silt up their holes, they are continually re-digging their residence, which irritates them. These rivers also move through caves, and Mermaids live there too, staring and wrapped numbly in the timeless dark.

They prefer to do nothing, lying in the still water staring up through the surface at the changing light. They can stay there, sleepless, for hours, or days, or weeks. Hunger comes. Then they grub through the mud for shellfish and scraps of food, which they devour. It billows up, blinding them and clinging to their hair and skin. Still waters do not wash it off.

Mermaids are often filthy, usually grimy at least, they rarely comb and their hair becomes matted and rank with weed and bits of shell.

They hunt fish in a listless way, or anything else. Birds, beavers, otters, people, frogs.

Mermaids love to seduce men and devour them raw but they are not very good at it. They are lazy, dirty, distinctly alien-looking and they smell. They make no attempt to alter or modify any of these things. Men find them frightening and strange. Men tell stories of the Mermaids around peat campfires or in the long dark night watches of riverboat crews. The stories always end with laughter and the men in them escape. The Mermaids sometimes hear this, drifting sadly in the murk.

Their song is a wordless lament drifting over the surface of the swamp. Like the song of the Mermaid, it is magical, but it provokes not desire, but sadness. Though men will often feel the fingers of sorrow plucking gently at their souls, they do not find it hard to turn away, moving easily to their drinks and banter and the light of the fire.

But men do fear this song above all because it steals from them their mothers and their wives.

This sadness strikes more powerfully on the female kind. They find it difficult to break its spell. Overcome and carried by deep piteous floods they go to the source of the song to aid and comfort to whomever sings it. This works even more powerfully on women who have had children, for whom the urge to find and comfort the Mermaid will be almost overwhelming in its ferocity.

Men will often have to physically hold back their daughters and sisters from walking off into the darkness towards the song, but if the woman has borne children they must fight and risk violence to prevent them disappearing into the night, wrestling and restraining, the woman weeping and clawing at him as she tries to escape, desperate to aid the lost soul she hears singing in the moors.

The moment the song stops, the compulsion disappears.

The Mermaids are not very interested in the women that come to them. If one finds them without drowning or dying of cold, they will allow her to mother them somewhat. If the song ends soon and she comes to her senses, the woman in question can sometimes find her way back home, or reach those who have set off to rescue her. But more usually, they die along the way, or are drowned or frozen attending to the indifferent Mermaids. If the Mermaids are hungry, they eat her.

But, not all those who come are old. Very rarely a girl before the age of puberty will hear the Mermaids song, and something deep within her will respond. Not sorrow, but something else, something almost alien and strange. Perhaps simply a refusal of the changing flesh, of time, or of a world not shaped for them.

Lebtoblast: "In the holes in the mud in which they sustain whatever passes for a life, the Mermaids hoard treasures of only one kind. It is the image of a living being they seek, an individual's unique face. Coins are acceptable but they prefer each person pictured to be different, so will usually have only one of each type of coin. They also love portraits, locketts, drawings, ceramics with human images, even the hilts of some swords.

If anyone steals even one of these images, they will disrupt the imagined world and ruin dozens of carefully constructed plots. The Mermaid will take leave of its senses and pursue this stolen 'character' or 'player' even to the risk of its own destruction."

The Mermaid names each of these images and builds a complex world inside her head in which they each play a part. She lies in the water endlessly re-arranging this created drama, living through it again and again and again, altering the positions of the characters and fine-tuning the plot. This fiction can often be more real to her than the dull underwater world in which she actually lives and he may refer to her creations as if they were real people, forgetting they are not. This is how we have come to know of the Mermaids treasures and their use.

When a young girl joins the Mermaids of her own desire, she will often go into the dank depths of the Mere holding a portrait of some kind. There, she will meet with the Mermaids and talk, entering into their imagined world. She will live there feasting off leeches and eating frogs. Slowly, over time, the cold will touch her no longer, her legs will fuse, she will change but never age again. A new Mermaid will be born.

MINOCHOIRON

"MIN-OH-CHEER-ON"

The Minochoiron is a creature of myth and urban-myth, possible product of a union betwixt man and pig.

Its appearance is ghastly.

It stands six or more feet high. Its strong and powerfully muscled shoulders are its highest point, for its clever piglike head is located almost half-way down its torso where it smiles and leers. Most is covered with a rough, apeline black fur, but, like the vultures head, several of its parts protrude pinkly from the covering. Its clawed feet (sized like a man's), its long large hands and its head are all flesh-coloured, fringed and free of hair.

Its piglike head is big. Bigger than a man's is, sized more like that of a large boar. On either side are asymmetric horns, one curved upwards like a bulls, the other crooked, or any other strange combination there could be. The skin here is pink-black like bruised meat, with liquid sympathetic eyes. When it smiles you see snaggle teeth, sharp like a pigs, its bite can take off hands. Its snout twitches, the Minochoiron has a keen sense of smell.

The creatures legs are squat, strong and bent, positioned like a crouching man's. It seems to shuffle about well enough, and awkward though it seems, it moves only a little less quickly than a man does, leaving tracks just like a naked human foot.

Its arms and hands are very strong, precise, like the hands of a strong-man, stage magician or card sharp. One is a little too big and the other too small, but the Minochoiron works with them together well enough. It can tie a single hair in knots, shuffle a deck in one hand, shave a face blind or throw a key into a lock across the room. It loves to demonstrate these crafts and skills and also learn and pick up more. It gestures fluidly with speech, highlighting and sculpting words inside the air; these gestures are a part of its unnatural charm.

It could smash or choke you easily enough, but is as likely to stroke, caress or play on you a trick, perhaps filching an item from your pocket before ostentatiously handing it back with a joke and a smile. (Minochoiron have a sly and subtle wit.)

The Minochoiron speaks in a steady river of well-constructed thought. It is never at a loss for words. Fluid and correct, it never slurs or shortens words, uses slang or interval sounds like 'uh' and 'um'. It knows a number of languages and is learning several more. The Minochoiron is learning always, it has a drive to live and know.



They love cities, sewers, slums, rookeries, abandoned palaces and forgotten roofs. There, they slowly build their labyrinth. The Minochoiron makes cleverly and secretly, it burrows into walls, makes false partitions with its clever hands, it saws through ceilings and through floors, it clambers around in tunnels under the ground, it builds from trash and local stuff, anything it grasps with its two hands can be incorporated into the maze. And the labyrinth winds within the city like an embroidered thread, in secret places, behind locked anonymous doors, the sounds of feet in the attic at night, something moving behind the walls, eyes in the grate in the crook of the street, a secret second city squeezed into the cracks of the first. It never stops adding to its labyrinth while it lives and the longer it survives the deeper creeps the maze. In the centre is its lair.

There it piles its treasures.

The Minochoiron watches from its hidden halls, observing lives. It likes to know things. Secrets. Rumours. Where people go in the dark. Who they speak to, who they see. The labyrinth is in the mind as well. The dark spaces, between things, hidden addictions and covert desires, second lives lived within the first. The monster's favoured treasures are mementoes of just such secret lives. Letters, rings, syringes, chemicals and whips, cash stuffed into envelopes and left, forged certificates of birth, deathbed confessions, warrants for arrest. It's true that blackmail occurs, but this is not the point. The Minochoiron hates waste and it would be a horrid waste to hold a secret without use.

But this is not why it wants the secrets. It wants them because it wants them, the labyrinths in people's lives, to match the labyrinth it builds, both together and made one. The open civil daylight world, slowly strangled by the crimes it keeps inside itself.

It can go on for a long long time. People notice things, but separately and alone, a door opens the wrong way, a passage broken into, a lost child's tale of wandering for hours between the walls. The rumours grow, the PickPocket Pig, the Man-In-The-Walls. The Minochoiron walls off its passages and retreats, for a while nobody quite puts it together. Even when discovered, it takes a lot of effort to extract. The authorities have a great deal on their hands; the zones that it infests do not have a high priority. And the creature has allies and spies. The Minochoiron charms the local dispossessed, homeless, beggars and criminal gangs. It can be quite a reliable ally for these groups, so long as it remains well fed. The Minochoiron is an excellent cook, but sometimes forgets that people are not food. Around the labyrinth grows a web-work of helpful human eyes to see and mouths to give alarm.

Apart from its remarkable charm, the Minochoiron has one other other-natural power. It can reach, with its hand, into the slit-open belly of a corpse and burrowing down, thrust the same hand up into the pocket, or bag, of anyone within a mile.

If you feel a squirming in your knapsack, leave it closed. If you sense another hand within your pocket when alone, don't look inside. You will see the Minochoirons ghastly hand, reaching out of nowhere, feeling around for something to steal.

If you are brave or very foolish, you may try to grasp the Minochoirons hand. Nothing could be more unwise. It will take tight hold of you and pull you through.

A frightening thing to witness in the street. Someone looks down at their pocket quizzically, reaches in, looks shocked, and before they can cry out they are wrenched bodily inside. All that's left behind is a coat turned inside out and some shoes that come off as the legs kick around. On examination (if you have the nerve), the pocket seems entirely normal. Certainly not big enough to do what you just saw it do.

The Minochoiron may eat the individual in question, or use their body for new pocket-slits. But, the charmer can be charmed, and it does love conversation, and to learn, as well as culture and the accoutrements of high estate. With quick thinking, charisma and courage, perhaps the creature could be persuaded to put aside its hunger, temporarily, in return for some service or act.

In combat, assuming the Minochoiron does not simply flee into its maze, it will reach into any one of a dozen nearby bodies and steal items from the pockets and bags of those opposing it, even as they fight, then use these things against them straight away. Most often those wishing to destroy the creature must also contend with a gang of thieves, beggars or even a group of pickpocket children charmed to its service.

THE MOBIUSNAIL or 'SAILSNAIL'

The Mobiusnail is engaged always on its first step, the moment of first passing the portal of its nest into a world of discovery. Since it is still taking that same step it responds to everything with a sense of delirious optimism.

They do not live long.

Most of the body of the Snail is concealed within a large lozenge-shaped shell coloured in a charming range of varied shades. The shell is about four feet long and about two and half high, or wide, at its thickest point.

Along the length of the shell are a series of holes, from within comes the singing of the snail. A looping chuckling like wind passing rapidly through irregularly shaped tubular bells, most evident when it is moving at high speeds

The snails seem to move upon a vertical 'sail' of flesh, giving them their common name 'SailSnails'. The 'foot' of the snail is a gigantic, slender, yet strong loop or ribbon of flesh in a state of continuous movement like a flood of pink silk in a strong wind. Technically it only takes one continuous step throughout the whole of its existence, its curling megafoot looping round in a muscular ripple, one peak, like the peak of a wave, held above its head in the manner of a swimmer. The other, lower peak pressed into the ground like the bent leg of a man mid-sprint.

When seen from side-on, it does look as if they are 'balancing' on a narrow ribbon, however, if seen in profile from above it can be observed that the snails megafoot curves sinuously like a snake on its point of contact with the ground, which gives it a more secure footing than might be expected.

The Snails come in vast seasonal migrations and move quickly together across the plains. Sometimes the gigantic herds travel from breeding grounds in the dark dank depths of cyclopean forests, looming ruins or cave systems, to the feeding areas of vast shining estuaries, long crashing tidal banks or the silver beaches of richly-fished inland lakes. There they wiggle into the sand or mud and dredge slowly through it day by day, feeding on nutrients and microfauna. If the season has been unusually bountiful and the snails feed well, they may set of en-masse on journeys that seem to have no purpose other than the joy of travel,



swooping in their hundreds of thousands across fields and through woodlands at a speed of about sixty miles an hour.

Most civilised people know not to try to outrun the Snails and, should they hear the snail song in the distance, simply to drop face-first onto the ground and let them pass over. There is no risk of being trampled by the snails delicate megafeet, but sometimes, very rarely, the unlucky have been suffocated by being drenched in the slime of an especially densely packed herd.

A small and obsessive religious order (the Order of Saint Cephalos) worships the snail and seeks to die in this way. They believe that being mummified in the snail-slime will preserve their souls through the burning fires of hell and help them reach heaven. The rarity of this density, and the speed and unpredictable nature of the Snails means they rarely achieve this and have to settle for purchasing recently recovered snailslime from peasants near a migration route and embalming dead monks in that instead.

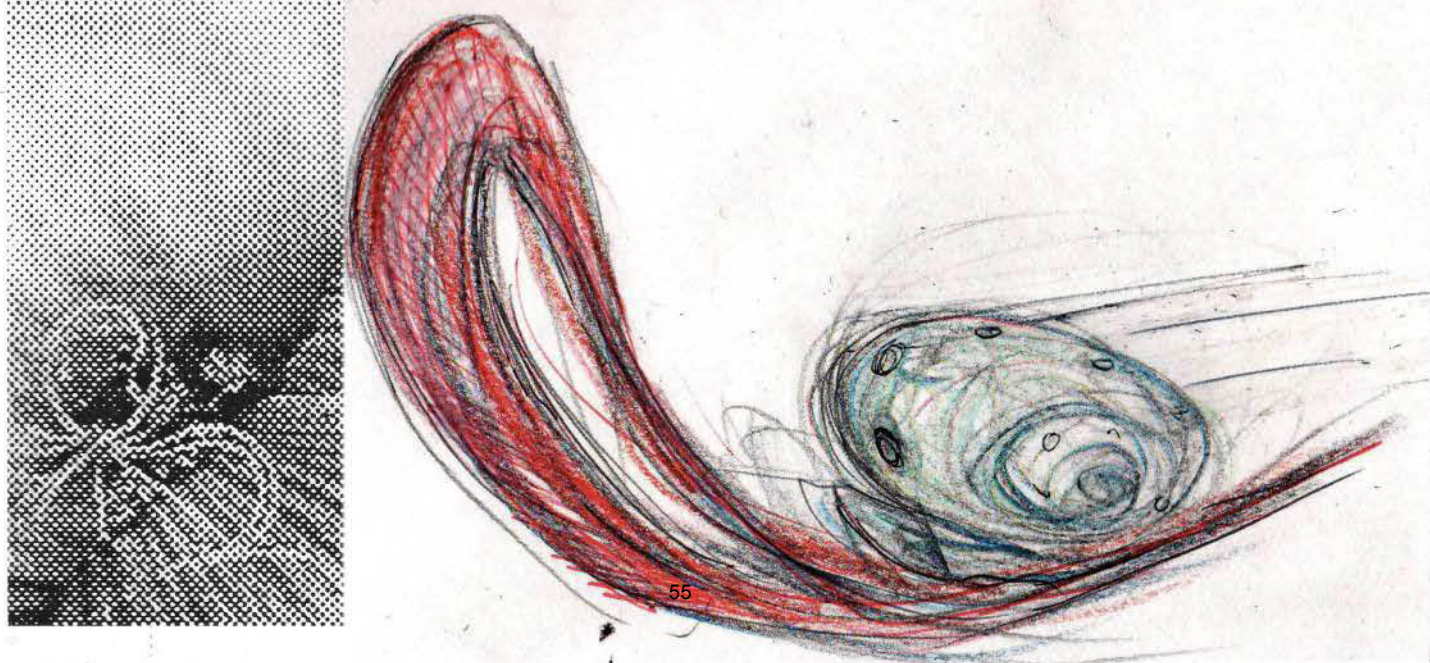
In its liquid state it acts as a low-friction oil. But away from the snail it dries and hardens quickly into a hard and brittle translucency. In either state it is a very effective heat-absorber.

The monks of St Cephalos are assumed to be former criminals and sinners trying to escape a well-earned hell-bound fate and though this is by no means always the case they do have a slightly dark reputation and are not always well trusted. In a small number of cases they are truly evil men engaged on active wrongdoing under the cover of religion and either pretending to 'seek the slime' or doing so only to escape a divine judgement they full expect to find them guilty.

Nevertheless most of the Monks are peaceful, though troubled folk, valued for their extremely fast foot-pace (banned from using horses, they are all very good long-distance runners). This has given them their common name 'the panting pray-ers' since many of their prayers are designed to be panted out one breath at a time whilst running.

The Mobiusnails are so fast that most predators become exhausted simply chasing them and their soft and rippling megafeet do so little damage to the ground that humans and others depending on agriculture are usually not overly offended by the snails moving quickly over their property. The silvery strands of snail slime can extend in a ribbon sometimes half a mile wide and stretch off into the distance, coating everything in an annoying, heatproof non-toxic crust. The strong and heavy shells do sometimes bump and bang into vertical walls, stupid people or animals unwise enough not to lie down when the snails come.

The 'singing' of the snail is actually a kind of invertebrate laughter..



MONSTER MAIDEN

A Monster Maiden is a bag of skin and flexing tubes. Most often met with standing up and ambling around like a thinking human being, which they seem exactly to be. Inside they are composed of peat and soil, twigs and branches, ooze and puddlewater and slowly growing monsters which breed relentlessly under their skin.

Very slowly, over several years, the monster grows inside. Its shape presses against their skin from the inside like a face pushed against a sheet. When big enough, it breaks through, a hard birth, and harrowing-long as the flexible skin distends and fresh claws taste the air for the first time. She hits the earth like a burst bag, turned partially inside out, her simple digestive tubes sprayed like dropped rope. She is still alive and in very little pain, her eyes can roll and her mouth can move.

This pile of skin will writhe, then gradually, in little claspings, pinch itself back whole. Her empty finger-tubes can mash back the torn wounds of her skin like wet clay. Soon, there will not even be a mark to show the tear. The maiden slithers round, swallowing things to fill up her insides. First she will suck the dirty mess from bogs and pools, then gulp twigs and branches, arranging them inwardly to provide a crude skeletal frame. Big branches make spine and limbs, little twigs are fingers, nuts are toes. Sometimes bits of the old wooden skeleton are still spread around where the birth took place, stained black and preserved by her peaty innards, and can be swallowed down and used again. Of course, human bones can also meet this use.

The Monster Maiden stands unsteadily up, her body looks like a wet scarecrow made of bags. She will seek out peat and mud, clay and little stones to eat. She will fill herself up and plump herself out, arranging herself internally. She will eat a special reed and with this she can speak and sing beautifully in a low soft whispering voice.

Then she will return to her strange life. Inside her, the next embryonic monster will form slowly and go about its growth. No-one knows what it will be.

Monster Maidens usually try to go on sanely some distance from people, so no-one gets hurt when the monster inevitably bursts. They live simple lives in bogs or deep in the dark forested reaches where the broken columns of rotting trees make natural caverns in the earth. A Monster Maiden is a person, no more or less likely to be good or evil than a human being. Their very long and tragic isolated lives, mean that some seem very wise, as wise as witches or muttering gusts of old wind, and others come rank with madness, bestial as starving dogs.

Intelligence is not always the survivor's friend, some forget and learn the self a hundred times across the marching eons of their life.

At times, consumed by loneliness, a Monster Maiden tries to live amongst humanity, moving to the edges of a distant village or isolated hamlet. They can pass quite well and the smell of bog is barely detectable from the outside. They can love and be loved, their skin is warm, but sexual relations do not go well. They are full of cold ooze, and a monster lives inside them.

Eventually it grows big enough to press its shape against their skin, if they are still amongst society when their tetra-pregnancy begins to show then things can go badly indeed.

The Monsters from a Monster Maiden are of any kind: mundane, destructive, cruel, unique, friendly wild and strange, sometimes with the wits of beasts, or minded like a man, sometimes exceeding wise. A Star-Nosed Brole, Flantagnet, Moon-Ape, Quarrynx or Guile-Toad, anything could grow within.

If the things born are at least semi-smart and know what loyalty is, they can be socialised. The Monster Maiden may live out in the wilderness with a kind of semi-family or omnimorphic tribe. It's not too bad. It is the closest thing to safety that either she or they will ever have. A brilliant, compassionate or very controlling Monster Maiden can end up collecting monsters over time. And Monster Maidens have a lot of time. If the Maiden has a mind that's cold and eyes that see, she may organise monstrous hierarchies of control, and make of them a force.

"I have seen ancient scratches in the margins of still-more-ancient texts, half burnt by fire, which hint a primal Tetrarchy. An Empire of the Maidens over which they ruled as Mother-Gods. But all reported observations of more local times, speak only of wanderers, hermits and those lost. If any still recall that ancient world, or how they came to be, or came to fall, none speak."
- Zenithal.

MOON APE

There are pale Titans of some higher world between the sky and stars for whom the open skies of mortal lands are but a dungeon-tomb. They fall from there in death and come, high in the air, in something like the forms of clouds. They drift from world to world, not recognising even in eternal sleep the borders of realities beneath their own, the spaces between mortal worlds to them like the gaps between our dreams to us.

These corpses, composed of ethereal decay, come in many sizes, some as small as houses, others like great cities in the air. Oddly shaped, dark, heavy, and rank polluted storms, but still clouds nonetheless. Only birds observing from above can clearly see the shape of the titanic corpse, curled or splayed in death, alien and strange.

Moon Apes guide and hide their cloudcorpse homes. They linger behind storms and weather fronts, they come at night, and often when the moon is full they use its light to hunt. When the wind is still and the night is dark, they drift above the scattered lights of some isolated inhabited place. The corpse they ride lets down thick vaporous loops, dark and burnet, spooling like slender tornadoes, yet without wind. They clamber down out of the sky on their black limbs, highlighted against the moon. They reach the ground and run amok. They kill and eat and bite and steal. Moon Apes love havoc and theft; they kill and steal with glee, abducting all manner of things, some valuable, some useless, sometimes pets or animals, sometimes children. Before dawn comes they climb back up the loops of cloud, taking the fruits of their theft.

The bite of the Moon Ape is vile in its effects. A simple and quick death would often be less cruel. It does not bleed, the edges of the wound lie raw and red, and cause little pain, leaving only a dull uncomfortable ache. Designed to feed secretly on gods, anybody bitten will deny the wound. They will simply not notice the missing limb or body part or chunk of flesh. The more of them is consumed, the more lethargic and deranged they are. Victims with all four limbs bitten off by the Apes vertical mouth will simply sit there, smiling, making inane conversation and excuses as to why they cannot move.

This means that the more flesh the Moon Apes take from you, the harder it is to fight them, after you have been bitten more than once it is even hard to believe they exist at

The cloud-corpses are dark black and fuscous with loops of yellow and caesious smog. There are flecks of more vibrant shades, chemical corbeau and fiery red, shining like pollutants, trailing rags of nacreous vapour, leaden in the sky, their undersides like the ripped open bellies of beasts

And inside these predatory clouds: parasites of that godlike race, fat and hungry and grown large Moon Apes.

The Moon Apes are black and hard to see, with a fuzz of red fur that gives them a bloody halo when they pass before the light. They walk with legs bowed out, ape-shapes with the frog-muscles on their bones, their long arms held up and swaying side to side above their heads. Their bent black legs can leap huge lengths, they reach and climb and grasp with inordinate ease. You are rarely as far as you think from a Moon-Apes hands and their long and lipless mouths.

This allows the Moon Apes to escape just retribution for their horrid crimes. If everyone is bitten several times then no-one will remember what went on. Victims will simply sit around, saddened and bemused, mourning what they have lost but not knowing where it went. Families, friends and goods all disappeared in something like a dream.

Should an outsider happen upon this terrible scene, and query what they see, that is what it sounds like, a nightmare come to life.

MURDER MEN

or OTHERMEN

THE MORTAL THINGS'

The Murder Men are other selves from some other place. They have no ecology and know system of existence. They simply are. There is nothing they want that they are not about to take.

They come naked or wearing rags. They use no clothes unless freezing brings them close to death, they wear no shoes and have no scabbards for their swords. They can use tools only if they hurt



They cannot speak except to repeat back what you say in mocking form, or to laugh.

The Murder Men live inside a pool of shadow, cast in every direction as if they were surrounded by invisible suns.

When the sun is overhead the pool shrinks and hangs around their feet, when the sun is low the shadow grows like the long ones sketched on midsummer afternoons, but in every direction at once. A prism for darkness.

Their features seem familiar, like the faces of friends seen in shade or far

There can be differences between them. Some have skin in negative-image black, their pupils are white dots. Some have a fire inside them. Thick poisonous melanic smoke spews from their mouth with each breath. The hands of some are tendoned curves of razorsharp bone, all they can do is harm. Some have pin-prick sized black faceted insect eyes. Its hard for them to see you if you don't move. Some ooze an oily mist through which only they can see. Some have one horrid yellow encrusted eye that weeps and sees in total dark. Some cough, sneeze and vomit blood, then laugh. They do this and the blood runs down their face.

But more often they look almost like someone you know, or someone you used to know.

The Othermen can be summoned very easily by just about anyone, but sometimes they come through on their own.

The Murder Man ritual is a reviled and hated form of suicide. It kills the initiator, and places everyone around them in extreme danger. Though it can be a final form of nihilistic redress for those assaulted and abused by an uncaring world.

To summon one, take a mirror bigger than your head. Look into it. Say "Murder me. Murder me. Murder me. Murder me. Murder me. NOW." Then smash your naked face into the mirror hard enough for it to shatter. A Murder Man will hear this sound. They will look for you. They will come through at a time and place that they decide. They will come out of the corner of your eye. When you are alone in the empty field and you have not seen a human movement for too long, then, behind you, where nothing was, the Murder Man will be.

There is no changing of minds. If you take steps never to be alone then they will take longer to come, but when they do there will be more. There will be enough. This can be very very bad.

Noted, is the case of Emperor Huezong, who, after an opium fuelled depression, awoke to find a broken mirror in his room and cuts all over his face. He commanded an eternal festival within his palace walls, endlessly renewed so that he need never be alone, and had the codes of privacy changed so that anyone of high status required multiple partners to go to the toilet. The story is well known and the ruins of the palace can still be seen today.

Sometimes they carry simple clubs or hooks or pitted blades, sometimes nothing at all.

The Murder Man will murder you. Obviously. Then it will cause terror. They like to kill, especially people, especially weak innocent people. They love torture and destructions of all types. They luxuriate in fear.

Sometimes groups of Murder Men come out of the wilds and the dark. They move in troupes and merry gangs. No-one has yet found their source. Some whisper of an evil maker of spells who lairs within a shard of stone upon a frozen lake, and every winter captures people passing through. They make their captives polish with their rags, the shining surface of the ice. Then force them to recite the ritual and drive their faces through

But the Othermen cannot be controlled or negotiated with. They cannot be aimed or ordered or enslaved. Why would anyone do such a thing?

No-one knows their origin. Investigators suffer daymares in which they imagine a world of murder on the mirrors other side. They begin to suspect that perhaps everything we do is being watched by laughing men with rusted hooks and blades. That perhaps their world is our own and they are reflections of us, or we of them. Once this imagining has taken place it can be very difficult to shake off. Few take things any further.

Once they arrive, the Otherman must eat and breathe and shit like every other living thing. They can be starved to death, they can die of hypothermia or fire. If killed their bodies look like ours. It is not wise to attempt eating one. They only effect human communities and only humans can summon them, no other race or species suffers the same way and some say that perhaps this is a curse of man in payment for some ancient wrong.

THE NAVARCH OF AaUt

Lost blotches on the map, abandoned names, tales of kingdoms lost to time. A sense the world is shrinking even as it is defined, lost in its own discovery. All quite correct, Hell took those nations and those towns, hell's thief, or bailiff, did the work: The Navarch of AaUt.

Hell is growing endlessly, growling at its boundaries with every passing day. Hell's servants toil, chipping at the grey chaos on each side, carving it into torture-halls, ziggurats and waiting rooms.

Never fast enough.

The means the Navarch uses, and the lands it claims, can vary a great deal. Sometimes nations just go wrong and earn a place in hell all on their own: that's method one. Other times Kings make a shady deal; that's nice and legal: method two. Enchantments can go faulty, to hide a place or keep it safe "Oh take us far from here!", a grey area: method three. Abandoned places, who owns those? Methods four to sixty are essentially theft. It all ends the same way.

When the Navarch takes a place the world seals around the wound, the edges knit together as if it had never been there, leaving scars and memories, legends and bad maps. Inside the lost land chaos briefly rules. The stars turn on one side as if the world itself capsized. A new sky rises, pillars of raw darkness and red fire interlock across a void where black stars madly whirl. Oceans die suspended in the air like helixes of murky light. Eons old storm-vortexes that haunt the skies of other worlds careen between the tangled zones. Extinction meteors swoop by, then curve and turn back, hunting like hawks for ages to wipe clean.

Then earth meets earth and the mad sky is thankfully blotted out. For those within the taken land, it seems as if the world curls over above itself and joins like paper turned into a tube. Far above can be seen land like your own and even people there you know. The Navarch has wrapped its prize into a cylinder to sail it through. If the taken place is a city with tall spires, the spikes of tall towers may intermesh.

This is now AaUt.

The only light now comes from fires and from the open ends. At the rear, or now, the stern, reality is gone. At the prow stands the shadow of the Navarch, stark against the chaotic light. There it plots the incalculable realities, grasping a gigantic wheel of slender bone just inside the wheel of the world itself. This wheel hangs just inside the open prow of AaUt and is nearly as wide, the Navarch plays endlessly upon it, building and re-building it.

The Navarch has little time to regulate its prize. It leaves that to its crew. The crew of AaUt is made of every kind of evil thing. It is a meritocracy of harm, whose ranks hold titles won in ages past.

First amongst the crew is the Ark-Eater Prime, who stands by the Navarch's side and gazes back into AaUt. Then come the Fistulix, from First to Third, the Grist-Things, the Mid-Ship Souls and then the standard Souls. There are many ranks to AaUt and though the holders change continually, the titles never do. An order given downwards to the next in line goes with 'Mister', regardless of gender, species or form. To the Navarch its Ark-Eater is always 'Mister Ark-Eater'.

The mortal population is now cargo, fuel and food. The Navarch is always hungry for rations and bones. The order goes forth 'Mister Ark-Eater, bones for the wheel!'. And so it is passed on from mouth to mouth until hordes of Midship Souls rage throughout the land to fetch what AaUt requires, or else feed the wheel themselves. Sometimes the order is for a very particular kind of bone, a good chance for promotion. (And anyone and anything can be promoted, be they monstrous enough and fulfil their orders well.)

Many times AaUt has reached Hell with no population left, and with a much reduced crew. It matters little to the Navarch, so long as they arrive. It knows how dangerous the journey is, in the ungoverned spaces

between worlds are dangers so strange and so great that even it, with its incredible power, must avoid or go around. The list of threats is without end, an Elder God, a Nightmare Sun, Dreamon Convoys many millions strong. Moon-Apes can infest the hull and crawl in through the stern, and so can other things, the Rational Souls may mutiny, and there are often powers 'upset' at losing pieces of their worlds to hell who may be in pursuit, angelic interdictors, Heavens revenue-men. The Navarch's mind is an ever-evolving map of an unmappable abyss, updated continually with every fleeting sight or sound.

To thwart the Navarch is a deadly game. Almost no other entity at all has the skill and wisdom to successfully pilot AaUt. And should the Navarch die? AaUt may be lost forever, utterly destroyed or, if very lucky, crash into some utterly unlikely world or place.

The Navarch will never surrender AaUt, but, it is intelligent, perceptive and willing to negotiate if the alternative is death. Quite cosmopolitan as daemons go. It might be willing to let its opponents off somewhere. Why fight to the death and risk AaUt itself when it can get rid of them right now by giving them what they want? So long as hell is reached.

The four eyes of the Navarch, if torn from out its head and used as oracular stones, can glean a path through chaos. But even someone with the eyes and with the wheel of bone would find it incredibly difficult, perhaps impossible, to steer AaUt anywhere other than to its destruction.

NAVIGATORS OF NOTHING

They are creatures of isolation, possessed by loneliness, repression, anger and the road itself.

A Navigator of Nothing, 'Tellerman' or 'Grumbler' is about seven feet tall. Its face is huge and chinless, with the mouth just above the centre of the mass, there are no teeth inside, but thick, tough corrugated lips stretching a foot or more across, that serve the same design. The nose is long, the eyes are widely spaced. It looks like a mangled body conquered by an oppressive imperial face, features have burst their bounds and swept over the torso plains, embedding features of the face in any place a face can be.

Strange thick arms come out from middle height and hang down about the length of human arms.

The Tellermen tend towards a pale and sunburnt pink, spiderwebbed by popped red arteries like those of drunks. These are thickest around the fists and forearms, its hands, stained haematic-red, continuously clench. This red may be that of the Navigators bulging and tortured arterial pipes, or they may just be blood red from blood, Navigators like to beat things to death.

'Like' is the wrong word, they just do it.

Leptoblast: "They are but men! Men tortured by long travail and altered so by the procession of inexorable fate! Beware this fate. For no man is immune from the Navigators Curse. The transformation takes place thusly: First, you must walk for many miles beneath the open sky, yet with no aim, you must travel constant and intent, by foot, yet to no locatable place. Second, you must be alone, never speaking to, or even thinking of, another human being. Not even a memory of a face may pass your mind. Third and finally, you must speak, continuously, without end, of, and to, yourself and nothing else. Then, slowly, inevitably, you will change, becoming something else, becoming as they are, possessed by purposeless purpose and directionless drive."

Ashkott: "No record has confirmed this transformation, and no eye has seen it half-complete. If true, it must take years. No one I have spoken to has ever claimed to see the transformation of a man to one such as these. Nevertheless, it is popularly believed by all that it is so and almost everyone I spoke to claimed it happened in a village some distance away or to a distant ancestor of theirs. There are no 'young' Navigators and it is unclear if there are any female navigators, or any male Navigators, they all seem male, but what does that mean? I suspect these creatures may not be a species at all, but some kind of forced mutation or supernatural effect."

The Navigators always walk. They walk through the day and the night. They cannot be stopped. They stamp or shuffle forward with their eyes down and red fists going back and forth. They grumble and mutter and whisper to themselves about ancient wrongs done to them. Sometimes very ancient wrongs, sometimes the language is not known.

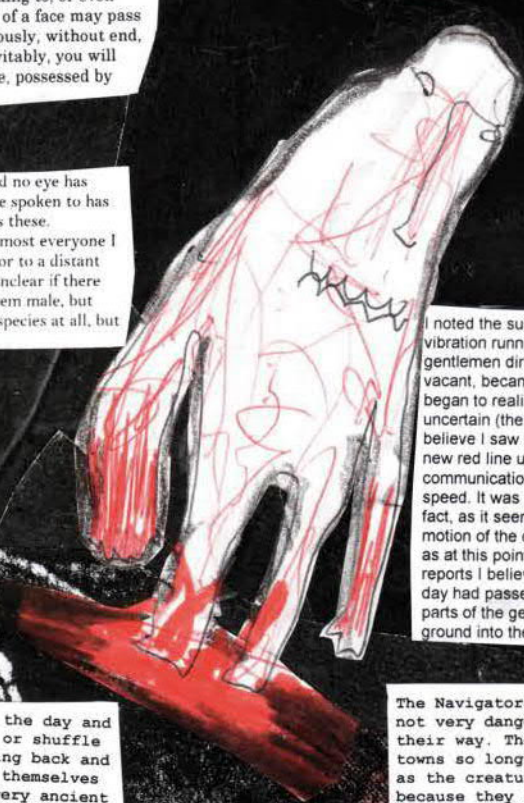
The Navigators of Nothing are never going to any particular place, they have no destination, they simply keep walking. But some strange power must illuminate them because they always seem to find a path, regardless of the environment or conditions. The path has no destination, but it will cut effectively through whatever terrain or obstruction lies before the Navigators path.

So if a Tellerman walks into a swamp, or a cave, or a labyrinth of stone, there is a way, and they know it. This makes them, very occasionally, exceedingly useful to a variety of people. If you are lost and see a tellerman and can follow it then it will lead you somewhere, not necessarily anywhere good, but somewhere different than you are.

Sometimes people have been lead out of danger by subtly shadowing a Navigator, sometimes clever armies have been lead through impassable swamps, or noble lovers through storms of snow, or innocent children through the forest dark. But more usually they are killed.

Zenithal: "If you see one on the road, mark this above all else: Avoid its Gaze. Navigators loathe the human gaze. They do not wish to be followed, or looked at or spoken to, never seek out contact. Luckily, since they ignore almost the whole of the world at all times, it is difficult to attract their attention at all. If you obstruct its path, get directly in its line of sight (they generally look down) or speak directly to it, it will stop

Having traced and discovered a Navigator, I found also perusing it, a man who claimed to be a fellow scholar, though he seemed somewhat inebriated and was accompanied by a handful of friends in a similar state. This gentleman informed me that he had been covertly listening to the Navigators muttered speech and had heard distinctly the name of an ancient and well-storied king of this land. After perusing his hastily scribbled notes (we were all walking, at this time, after the Navigator, following some distance behind) I became quite excited, though sparse and difficult to read there did seem to be scattered references to real events and ages over a vast period of time. The gentleman informed me that intended to attempt communication and asked if I would be willing to observe from a safe distance and take notes, should any successful exchange of information ensue. I did attempt to dissuade him from this rash course, but, his mind being irrevocably set, I agreed and fell back some distance, observing through a glass. He ran ahead and, moving directly into its path, hailed it in a friendly manner.



I noted the subsequent progression of events. First, a silent and intense vibration running across its whole body, the Navigator turned, facing the gentlemen directly for the first time. Its fists clenched. Its face, formerly vacant, became distorted, evincing an expression of extraordinary rage. I began to realise I had made a serious mistake. The creature screamed. I am uncertain (the glass was shaking somewhat at the exact moment) but I believe I saw a new artery burst or bulge under the creatures skin, tracing a new red line upon it. The Navigator ignored any attempts at further communication. I am afraid it beat the gentleman to death at extraordinary speed. It was very fast and very strong and I hope that its first blow did in fact, as it seemed to, break the gentleman's spine. The screaming and the motion of the creature continued for some time. I am not certain for how long as at this point both I, and the gentleman's friends, fled the scene. From later reports I believe the Navigator eventually simply continued on its way. After a day had passed, we returned and were able to recover, with a shovel, large parts of the gentleman's body, the bones were utterly impacted and the flesh ground into the dirt over a wide area. His notes, irrecoverable"

The Navigators are not hated or hunted because they are not very dangerous unless you specifically try to get in their way. They can walk safely through villages and towns so long as people are quiet and look away. As soon as the creature is past, life can go on. And perhaps because they are sad, and terribly alone, and few who look at them fail to think of what dark constellation of events it might be that drives a thing to such an orgy of loneliness, they have at least a measure of respect, or its shadow at least. We are glad it's them, not us.

NIVEOUS DREAM AXOLOTL

Amphibious through dreams, salamandrine in the human mind, this eau-de-nil Axolotl hunts men through fantasies of snow. It is a lithe, light-green ambush beast, as large as a leopard or miniature lion, watchful, supple. Strong. The head is wide and split by shining needle-teeth that gleam as if a smile. Large limpid eyes on the side, shifted a little towards the fore in order to parallax prey. The body curls and weaves, deftly compressing, cat-like, snake-like, binding force for springy leaps, attacking by surprise.

The Niveous name is gained by the collapsing temperature of dreams. It lives inside your mind and eats your random thoughts. The loss of these small scurries of the mind and disconnected flaps of thought, is chill. You dream of snow and Axolotl. The longer the Axolotl lives within the mind the colder grow your dreams. At first, frost writes its unexpected words, then ice cracks beneath your sleeping feet, the dream-sky closes in a veil of polarised white. Snow comes and the hills and cities of your dreams are cloaked and changed by a sourceless winter without end. Through all of this, the Axolotl stalks, pale green, glimpsed in distances, watching and circling. An assassin carried in a work of art.

The Axolotl does no harm to you. To it, you are its world. You are the forest that it stalks through, the river in which it swims. It is watching through your eyes, looking for its target and waiting for a chance to strike. But as it eats your thoughts, you focus more and more on the green dream. You obsess monomaniacally on snow and the pale stalker that you imagine that you see. With no random or unlikely thoughts inside your mind, the Axolotl slowly starves.

"I have identified, (tentatively), three means by which the Axolotl enters and escapes the human mind.

Firstly, through a work of art. As dreams of snow and Salamanders-green intensify, not knowing what impels their monomania, many individuals are driven to compose works on this theme. They may create a painting, poem, story, song or tapestry in which the Axolotl plays a part. If this work has quality enough, it may provide a 'bridge' to one who contemplates it deeply and alone. To be absorbed, emotionally engaged or moved to transport by this work can make you the next host. Hence the tales of paintings 'come to life' or songs killing in the night.

Secondly, it may exit or gain ingress by main force. (This method is preferred whenever the Axolotl wishes to surprise its prey.) The pupil of the eye opens and opens like black water filling a black pool. The head tilts back. The skull warps momentarily to compensate. (The host screams, usually.) The Niveous Dream Axolotl leaps out as if from water. Generally the eye involved in this goes back to normal afterwards, although there can be some distortion.

Thirdly, I am almost certain that the Axolotl can creep in and out in the night without waking you up. Frustratingly, I have been unable to confirm this. I have arranged for teams of watchers to observe me secretly in my sleep, though gaps bored in the walls, so far without sign.

The dreams intensify. - zenithal

When it grows hungry enough, the creature will emerge to feed. Striking where it can and retreating into any accessible brain.

"A relic of an ancient war fought in, between and with, transcendent conquering dreams. Many of the ruined things and strange abandoned places seen in dreams are simply ancient fortifications of this war, long since collapsed, fragmented into comprehensible ideas.

Once hunting-packs trained to specific scent, or assassins made to hide in minds, they are now feral things, hunting where and what they will, emerging to take meat then slinking back inside the brain to get away.

Slim rumours tell of words or rituals or spells which still command the Axolotl, directing it towards specific prey. Of Radical Dreamons who trade death for an unexpected price. Though, one need not have such fine control in order to make such a use. A mighty work of art, a painting perhaps, of extraordinary beauty and rare device, something to be treasured and viewed alone away from prying eyes. This could bring a deadly predatory beast through walls and rings of guards and spells of Subtle Art where no other deadly thing could safely pass.

A poem, whispered to a king, of snow and eau-de-nil, may spell an empire's end" - Leptoblast



ORANORN

The Oranorn reigns absolutely over those who fear the futures in its polyphonic song.

These evil beings are greedy, and hungry for pungent expendable wealth. They like spices, incense, orchids, perfume, the shavings of tropical trees, flowers and ripening fruit. And music, all the time, music without end.

They lair in caves and ruined halls thick with searching tendrils of smoke that waft from silver censers, constantly refilled. It stinks, and smoke-stains darken the abandoned silks of many colours left to rot upon the earth and stone. Hunting through the smoke-dark halls comes music, played by terrified and enslaved bards, starving, manacled in silver chains, piping through the broken lips and weeping blood from fingertips upon the tortured frets. Sometimes the Oranorn joins in, its many voices soaring like a choir.

At the top of its body, about fifteen feet high, is an eye, a single sad-looking eye in a small round head. Below this is the mouth, and little else. The mouth is vertical and huge, running right down the Oranorns centre like a slice in fruit. To either side are meagre wings, non-functional, in which it takes enormous pride and which it can manipulate at will. The whole rests upon four froglike legs, bent at the base, like an idol sits upon its stand, (though the Oranorn scampers easily enough). Two childlike arms make up the rest, right at the bottom of its mouth, low enough to stroke the ground.

An Ornaorn will not die, or live, by natural law, it is tangled in the web-work of consequence and time. It speaks with many voices, all tumbling and cascading from its mouth in a waterfall of polyphonic sound. If it so chooses it may pronounce the fate of those nearby. Each Oranornic voice will speak of a specific deed and be heard by one specific nearby soul. If those who hear their spoken fate do not relentlessly pursue its fulfilment, they will be cursed. These curses come in many forms but each intensifies in strength the harder someone struggles against fate. A favoured tool is metamorphic charm, friends transformed to beasts inherently opposed: Mice and Cats, a Wyvern and some Cows, Snake and Marmoset.

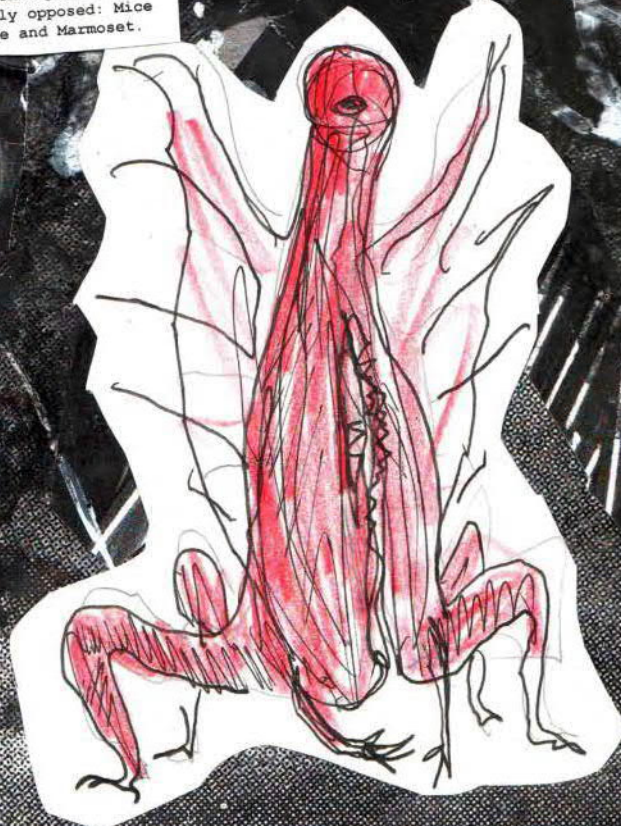
The Oranorn can never kill directly with its voice. It cannot order you to jump off a cliff or fall on your sword. Its cruelty is more tragical and indirect than that. Its voice commands multiple acts that are impossible to mutually fulfil. For instance, it might require of one opponent: that they kill the Second Chancellor of Jukai, and of the second: that they guard the Second Chancellor from harm. Or that the first must hold a certain quantity of gold, that the second steal it, always from the first and to a third decree that no laws be broken at all.

So friends become each other's executioners. They must follow fate or be transformed, those who fulfil their fortune must thwart the future of their friends, either doing them direct harm, or condemning them to the consuming curse. To live is treachery and it is charity to die.

The Oranorn can be killed only by a group who have matched their contradictory fates. It must be a group who have been cursed as one and met the stated deed, and lived, who strike the Oranorn as one. If this is done, then every blow will penetrate and land, the Oranorn will die. But this has never been achieved by anyone at all. If anyone else attempts a blow or spell, the strike goes wide, rebounds or mysteriously misfires.

Oranorns gain access to the luxuries they love by lairing near a populated place and using the fear of its many-fated song to extract the services and sacrifices it desires. Oranorns each have a particular taste in flesh, some will only eat young girls with yellow hair, others only men with one leg, others only pregnant women. If threats are not sufficient, it will simply walk through town, pronouncing fates. After the horror is done with, the shamed and self-loathing survivors will usually do whatever they are told.

There is one potential weakness in the Oranorns power: the fates it gives are literal. Only the exact wording of the prophecy must be obeyed.





OZIMANDRIAN

or 'THE GHOSTS OF STONE'

Crawling unbowed from the wreckage of their world. Hoisting itself out of the sand to scream at the sky with a tongue of fire. Dragging itself, gnashing, after justice and an honourable accounting for the forgotten past.

Imagine a gigantic stone head, lying on its pack, looking up. The stone, crablike has grown legs, spindling limbs of jointed obsidian. The legs are very slowly dragging forth the massive burden of the stone. Behind it is a furrow in the earth, a gouge where the head has pulled itself for mile upon uncounted mile.

The rock has been consumed or corroded from within by an incredible heat. It has fallen away into a burning void leaving a mouth-like rim of broken stone that billows smoke and waves of heat.

The Ozimandrian can thrash with its limbs, it can slowly tip its head up and down and from side to side to breath gusts of molten fire. It can chew and destroy anything it gets inside its mouth.

They are ruin-relics. Born from the destroyed corpses of cities lost to time. The stones brood deeply and long over the aeons, considering their wrongs. A slow anger and a deep sorrow grows, condenses, like thick syrup moving to a point. The rage of the rock and the abandoned place seeps and coagulates in one particular stone in one particular place.

(This is the process by which ruins become merely areas of dead rock. As the sadness seeps out of the place as a whole, a sight that might have previously awoken poets souls now seems only a field of broken things, no more or less than a desolate part of the natural world, or some rubbish left in a forgotten place. The luminosity and sense of tragedy and time has left.)

In that one particular stone in which the sorrow does condense, (often a statue or foundation stone) a strange reaction starts. It heats up, glowing from within. If the desolation around it is wide and tragic enough, and if it is all brought slowly and surely to a single point, (not too fast and not too slow) then the rock will incandescence from its core, it forms a screaming mouth, facing up towards the sky. The melted stone seeps down and forms the limbs that ring the rock, crystallised obsidian. Sometimes tiny eyes are formed above the mouth. A disconcerting sight if the stone in question happens to be a huge sculpted head, in which case the position of the face of the sculpture and the face of the new born Ozimandrian can be quite different.

The birth howl of the Ozymandrian, the cracks of breaking stone that accompany it and the horrible grating and gasping as it slowly drags itself out of its entombment (should it be born underground) are quite frightening, especially since they echo round the ruins of an empty city where nothing should live at all.

From this point on its purpose is defined by the dream-like memory of the stones themselves. Their memory of the cities death. If the destruction was the product of one particular deed by one particular group, the creature will seek revenge. It starts to drag itself towards the closed city of that race.

This can be problematic. The culture in question may have merged with another, changed its identity or even disappeared since the city of the Ozimandrian was destroyed.

Nevertheless, the creature is rarely dissuaded, no matter how little sense it makes to anyone else. It will go towards this city or town and gnaw on its foundations, causing it to collapse. Though the Ozimandrian is very very slow and has limited offensive capabilities, it is capable of this. Being made of solid rock and immune to most forms of magic, there is very little that can stop it.

As horrible as this seems, the destruction of an urban zone may be the least disastrous result, since the Ozimandrian will rest once the deed be complete. If the cause of the destruction of the original city is unclear, mixed, complex, or lost to time, then it will be wrathful and horribly confused, more like an angry and sorrowful ghost than any other being.

Its concerns are justice and an accounting for wrongs. If this cannot be easily accomplished by a giant stone fire breathing head with obsidian spider limbs (and history being what it is, usually they cannot) then the Ozimandrian becomes like an angry spirit haunting the plains, directing its rage on whatever foundations and architecture it can find.

Even if expertly dissembled by teams of Special Forces Masons, if its rage is not assuaged, the spirit of the Ozimandrian may simply pass on to another block or piece of stone and begin its exceedingly slow rampage all over again. The only way to stop it is to somehow assuage its spirit and convince it that justice, in some form, has been done. Not in the terms of lives and individuals, but in terms of history, culture, and especially, architecture.



PALADINS OF THE FALL

The Paladins are insect-men, about five feet tall with their 'antlers' adding another foot and a half. Commonly a russet red, rufous like Autumnal leaves, but they vary, sometimes all the way from sombre gold to a dark dark midnight-green.

They have thick strong bodies, low hanging arms, and nearly featureless faces with two widely-spaced eyes. They are exceedingly tough and strong. They dig fluidly and fast.

They are calm and silent, speaking rarely and with difficulty. They do not enunciate, a deep strong buzzing-voice comes from somewhere in the thorax, but they comprehend. But barely Time - And words or concepts directly relating to time seem to slow and confuse the Paladins Of The Fall. They must stop and buzz amongst themselves to translate them at all.

Their city is not far under the earth, only a few foundations-length down beneath the grass. It is no abyssal realm. Still, you should not go. Leave it be until the seasons turn. When the snow lies thickly on the ground, then delve into its ruins and echoing halls and see the golden signs of a culture long since gone.

No-one is certain how the Paladins know time or feel its touch, but it is not as we. They build huge and beautiful soil-cities in tunnels beneath the forests and the borders of the plains. Sometimes these cities intersect with or lie below, expanding human lands. There is no cause for concern. The Paladins rarely interact with the surface world at all. They occupy their time performing strange rituals under the earth in caverns and palaces they have made there.

We know this by the very occasional signs. The sound of a sombre procession moving slowly under our feet, with the low hum of their voices in time. The ringing of deep bells and unearthly chimes from under the ground. A waft of incense issuing from the bole of a tree as something passes deep below. In Autumn, those looking on the plains at sunset when the shadows pool thickly on the ground, should they view it from a height, say they see strange patterns in the earth stretching for great distances. No doubt the displaced mass of the cities under the soil.

In Autumn, when the cities are there, they have always been there. They have been there for thousands of years and the land has adapted to them.

We do not go to the cities at this time. The Paladins protect their rituals. No-one who has gone returns, or has so far.

As Autumn turns to winter and the snow begins to fall, the ruins of this underground world may be sought out. They are smaller then, much of the earth has fallen in. There is no point in our time when it falls, there is no movement we can see. A day passes with the last leaves of Autumn rotting on the ground: the city is a ruin, and has always been. Before that it was new and whole, now ancient, broken and collapsed.

They are difficult to reach, flooded, wet and dark, sometimes infested by the lesser horrors. The tides of time run thick there, you may not return to the year when you set out. But there are strange reports and they speak of great beauty and hidden majesty under the earth.

At first, gloom on the snow, winter shadows, openings, air pressing cold fingers against your face, still clean and old, holding the scents it carried when it died. Simple tunnels, walls dark but clean as bone. So silent that the unexpected hitches in your breath seem like

footfalls in another room. The reflection of your lantern in the hanging ice dies slowly, persisting once you leave, reluctant to go. Your path is tracked by that repeated gleam echoing pale lamplight in the places you have been.

Then deeper, complex more and more, the curved soil of the walls is textured, dark, like teak. Your breath forms mazes in the air, you are not meant to be here. Then, at the deepest points, huge boulevards and cathedrals and temples and processions of carved and columned soil and stone. The earth black and without scent. The ghosts of bells ringing in the dark.

Vaulted fungal gardens, utterly overrun with ruined and decrepit life, but clearly once both beautiful and strange. The music of falling icicles tracks your steps. An ash leaf frozen in ice, one span extended upwards like a sail, gently skeletonised to black in the still air, the frozen remainder gold. Snow-carpeted rooms far under the earth where no snow should ever fall. A woman, dead, whose tears are frozen on her face in mazes running down her cheeks webbed in tiny chains of ice on which a single spider crawls. Life here breeds frost with its touch and its tears.

Great vaults of darkness, made with such care and guarded for such long ages. A dark reflection in the ice. Flurries of old un-melted snow laid out in waves upon the floor. The insect shells arranged in circles round a silent bell. The sound of a leaf falling, but there are no leaves.

Signs of a deep-thought mighty people long lost to the world. Disappeared, never to return. And of the things or dreams or spirits of the dead which guard them still.

And treasures - great bells of gold, trees of bronze and silver mounded round with fallen autumn leaves of platinum and polished brass. The horns of the empty paladins are hung with bronze, bells shaped like branches, leaves and sycamore seeds. They are still in the frost-pregnant air. Then after you have long passed on you hear the ringing of their movement as they stand and march.



Leptoblast unwisely dug for them in Spring: "Nothing, nothing at all. The soil is virgin and untouched as if nothing has passed but worms. Yet, I did discover, about a hundred feet down, a natural fault or cavity in the earth in which a man could stand. My guide, an apparently ancient man whom said only that he came 'from the winter', whispered to me that here, in six months or so, would be a palace of a line of priests that ruled for ten thousand years and that in the snows of late November, there would be a dark infested ruin, fearful, yet, still with the memory of greatness. He would say no more. I will not wait here. If the palace is denied me, what could the ruin hold?"

Those who dig in summer report... Signs. Suggestions. Intimations. A small tunnel, quickly collapsed, a chattering in the earth. But nothing more.

The Paladins have an isolationist culture, but there are sometimes things they need. Communities nearby keep ready supplies of incense, gems, rare silks and other unusual, beautiful or useful aspects of the surface world. In Autumn, when they are there, and if they trust those with whom they deal, the Paladins may consent to trade. They appear always in the woods, surrounded by falling golden leaves. They will exchange their strange fungal foodstuffs, unusual rocks and minerals from below and weird insects with specific medical or chemical properties, for things they may require.

They are not without mercy and if a community is starving they may drop their price and provide enough for the people to live on.

The most secret thing they trade, one never mentioned to outsiders, is the dead. They will only do this for very young children. More likely if the child is innocent, dead by natural accident or disease.

If their price is accepted, they will come from a veil of golden leaves, holding the hand of the one who died. They are restored in full, with no memory of where they have been, except, sometimes, they speak of a burning world enfolded in black promontories and a dark phantasmal shore against a grey sea.

If an unwise parent should dig up the body of the child they buried, they will find it still there, mouldering in the earth, as well as alive and sleeping under their roof. Both real, both true.

PARADUSA

or NODEUSA

The Paradusae are beautiful, but sad. Relics of a mythic past. There are many in the world, but they are always found alone, no society exists between them.

An attractive young woman in her late teens, her hair is lank and unwashed, her clothes once fine, now old, stained and poorly arranged. There are two snakes where her arms should be. She will live forever, never sicken and never die, unless it is by the sword. She can be killed.

Bound by curse, almost no Paradusa wants to be where they currently are. They are well respected by the lower orders of life, who often seek to serve them simply out of instinct, but they are loathed by civilised peoples in exactly the same instinctive way. None will permit a Paradusa to live amongst them. Zenithal claims this loathing must be part of the Paradusa's curse as: "it can be altered neither by evidence or time."

Non-settled people such as nomads and most adventurers, feel none of this disgust.

Paradusa commonly find themselves lairing in some draughty and unpleasant ruin, waited on and served by Goblins, Anemone Men, Strangels, Thug Bugs or simply criminals and refugees.

Paradusae are cultured and perceptive, with the wisdom and awareness of the normal human range. They are not particularly sociopathic and either natural inclination or the long ages of life, have lead them to a perspective of calm neutrality. Many seem to hold distant half-forgotten memories of strategy, deception and war, some inner access to a faded record in the mind, making them better than average tacticians and leaders. This means they are often effective rulers for these groups, certainly compared to the murderous thugs that tend to end up in charge.

These collections of semi-competent waifs and strays hold the Nodeusa in a nearly-queenlike high esteem. A love, which in its processes seems, again, like a memory of some other place or time. "Like children imitating, in their own simple way, an adult ritual after the event." - Zenithal. A near-worship of her (to them) irreducible beauty and incredible powers.

They wait upon her and attend her every whim. She will never deny their service. The Paradusa needs at least some active servants, as she can neither pick up, nor manipulate objects on her own. Without them she would be reduced to running naked in the fields and using her snakes to hunt mice.

What the Paradusa really wants are the pleasures of civilisation. Art, music, fashion. Charm and wit. The attention of the educated mind. Courtiers, books, handmaidens and social grace. Her servants love her so, they may try to steal these things. But this is the wilderness, and such activities bring down the wrath of any nearby settled peoples.

Lepdoblact has claimed: "The powers of the Paradusa are born from her origin in myth. I have confirmed with my researches, they are the product of a divine curse, (though no one knows exactly which one). It was forgotten long ago." (Typically, he leaves no record of the sources he consulted, making his claim useless for any future researchers.) The Paradusae make no comment either way.

Most notably, her gaze can, with some effort on her part, turn the eyes of any meeting it to stone. This affects only the eyes, not any other part. The eyes solidify into marble spheres in the head, then usually fall out and roll clattering on the floor. She cannot turn them back. This is not easy for the Paradusa and can exhaust her if done repeatedly.

Her two snake arms are both vicious and only partially under her control. To force them to obey takes enormous concentration from her, most of the time they simply attack any living thing that they can see.

Their colouration varies but one will always have some element of griseous grey and shadowy black in its scales, the other bright aurulent gold and incarnadine red. When angered, the teeth of the red-gold snake will seem to drip fire.

The venom of the red-aurulent snake is an ichor which bursts into flame on contact with the air. When this kills it does so in an extremely dramatic way. First flames burst from the puncture wounds, then, as it flows throughout the body, from any recent battle cuts and finally, as it reaches the lungs, the victim breathes out flames.

The teeth of the shadowy snake hold a toxin that converts all flesh it meets to twilight. If the victim 'dies' from the poison they are pushed slightly into the world of shadow and become a kind of mild shade. They can interact with this world as a ghost would, sliding under doors and oozing through cracks, floating around, yet able to take no physical action. They gain none of the rumoured remarkable powers of these more-famous undead beings.

Again, she cannot reverse the effect

A Paradusa will have in her service several of these twilight shades. These are members of her group who were very old, sick or injured. She converted them to an intangible form and they keep watch and spy for her. This means she is often very well informed.

Nodusae are close, somehow to shadow, they see into it and through it, as if it were light. Wherever their eyes rest the energy or motive force of light drops off by slow degrees, this turns light into shade, sunlight into twilight, shadow into darkness. She leaves a river of twilight wherever she looks. She can see invisible and intangible things.

She can, by concentrating very hard, produce a brief flurry of rain, even in desert conditions. In addition, their presence in an area usually improves the fecundity of both crops and animals. Since she carries no particular desire for conquest or harm, her existence on the borders of civilisation actually has a stabilising effect, tying up populations that might otherwise raid and destroy purely on their own initiative.

The end result of this is that over many years, civilisation usually expands around the Nodeusa's lair, forcing her to move on to still more distant ruins.

PARROGUANA OR POST LIZARDS

Once heralds of an ancient empire, now all they carry are whispers and fragments overheard.

The most common Parroguana is a lizard about the size of a medium dog. They have unusually straight legs, the drooping stomach typical of their kind, a thick tail and a beaked head with two large widely set eyes. All Parroguana's have a frill around their neck which they raise when they are memorising words. They listen. Not only as animals do, but like secretaries and spies, they record. And they can speak their message with the felicity of an intelligent bird, in the voice that delivered it.

Zenithal: "Whatever race or empire bred the 'Parroguana', worked its alterations well. They possess a perfect memory for sound and voice, they can mimic and repeat exactly what they know and can store long strings of sound precisely over deep stretches of time. Most remarkably, if a message goes unheard, the creature can breed, and repeat the message to its children. In this way, the information encoded in the memorised voice can live much longer than a single beast. And so we see that flesh can outlast stone. They are the only remnant of that ancient race, even the stones of their cities are dust, but their voices live, dulled and garbled by time, issue from shadows and the branches of trees."

Almost everything we know about the Parroguana comes from Ashkotts painstaking and years-long investigation:

"I believe they were bred to prefer and recognise the taste of certain highly specific insects. These would then act as 'postage', being bought and sold separately, and as triggers for the creature to record its sound. This explains why Parroguanas are still known to randomly record sounds they hear, especially conversations. Should a creature carrying no message happen to eat the correct insect, it will be primed to record. If there is a conversation or voice nearby when this occurs, the creature will attend. It will go on, carrying this message until delivered, to someone, somewhere.

Some sub-species are easily triggered to both record and speak. Whenever they eat, they record, if they later see a human being, they release what they know. These cheap and common messengers have degraded over time, their voices no longer sound human and the voices they hold are garbled and strange. They hate to be seen and will

commonly speak from shadows and behind corners. These are the source of the 'voices' and 'ghosts' that frighten people so.

But numerous varieties exist. Much more important, are the specialist and pure breeds. I believe noble houses each had 'signature lizards' with complex aspects of defence. Some spit blood, others have toxic skin or poison bites. The Royal Family had a breed which can both glide and swim, the semi-mythical Gold Parroguana. The military bred huge pony-sized Parroguanas to carry vital secrets in safety. These can still be found in the deepest forest.

These rare and more expensive breeds have not decayed. They were 'locked' each responding to a particular combination of colour, scent and action. They will not, cannot, give their message to any simple passer-by and they have passed on and preserved their communiqués, from parent to child, even since that distant time. They speak still in the language of the Auralent Empire, and each will speak but once. These creatures explain the strange reports of voices speaking in an ancient language from the trees. If by some freak of chance, a Parroguana experiences that rare combination of sensations that was bred into them as a 'lock', it will give its message.

I have dedicated years to capturing these creatures, learning their language and decoding the locks that loose their tongues. Through a combination of masks, incense, drugs, a kind of stage set and various other paraphernalia, I have been able to hear the tongue of the Auralent Empire. I have even uncovered a little of its language.

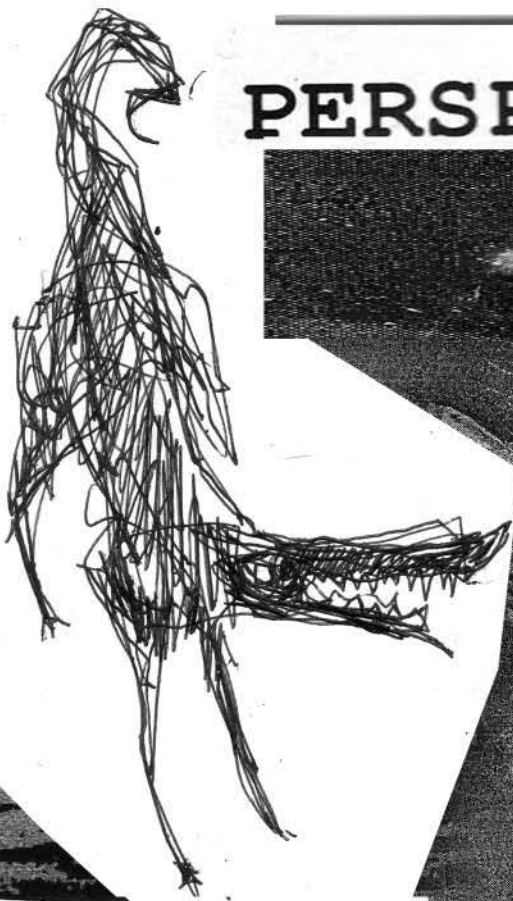
Each particular family line of these rare breeds carries one particular message, and each message is a vital communication between high status members of an ancient culture in the months and years before it fell. By analysing and compiling these messages, we may look through time to a sliver of living history."

Ashkotts major work on the Parroguana and the language of the Auralent Empire made his name, and broke him. It was clear to several of his readers, if not to him, that in the dying years of the empire, many of its elite, foreseeing the coming collapse, put significant energies into stockpiling and hiding financial and magical resources which they intended to recover later. Many of the 'rare-breed' Parroguana messages relate to the location and nature of these still-hidden stockpiles, or to other useful secrets of that ancient time. The creatures were hunted savagely and any rare Parroguana from a previously unseen line still commands an extremely high price.

The species-wide catastrophe broke Ashkott. He never engaged in field research again.



PERSPECTIVE DOGS



They do not act like mammals, or even work very intelligently as a pack. They will happily eat each other if one is wounded. They move more like deep sea predators, in curves and smooth lines. Each acting as an individual. Circling circling circling around you, then quickly swooping in to nip off flesh.

No living being has ever accessed the Dog Dimension, even by being dragged into it by a school of Perspective Dogs. The Dogs must always kill first, and then pull in the corpse. People

who have seen this happen say the body they drag, gets smaller and smaller, as they do, but seems to hang in mid-air, as if it was being pulled underwater, the blood seeping from it does not fall or flow, but billows in red clouds. The Dogs do not look as if they are swimming through water, but stepping on solid ground.

When the Dogs are done with their meal they will drag the corpse out of their dimension and leave it, often circling 'above' it.

When seen-as-small, they are at a distance to the world. They cannot be reached physically, but magic can touch them. Magic-Users can see this strange direction more fully than others and can direct their spells into it exactly as if it was simply a normal distance away.

So, a Bowman firing arrows at the dogs as they ran towards him in mid-air would find the arrow simply passing through, bending around, or rupturing in mid flight as it interacted with the Dog Dimension space. But a Sorcerer casting some uncanny curse, could reach them directly.

In addition, the dogs cannot use their dimension to bypass things like solid walls or locked boxes. They can disappear 'up' so that they seem like flies circling above your head, but if they exit the Dog Dimension over a chasm or a deep pit, they will fall exactly like a normal being. They always orient to gravity as it is in this world. So if they are circling above your head then you will see their tiny three-toes paws and bellies as if they were on a glass sheet hundreds of feet above you, they must spiral down to get to you, as if they were running down a helix of glass stairs.

If you locked them in a tightly sealed room, they would have to come out of the Dog Dimension and try to chew through the doors. But if there was even a small gap, they could go so 'far away' that their relative size was small enough for them to squirm through it.

They can hunt you from inside the Dog Dimension, but if they can see you, you can see them. Their sense of smell and hearing is not that good. To interact with you in any way, they must enter the world fully and become vulnerable to human harm. It is rumoured that magical swords, spears and arrows can also enter the Dog Dimension, though the hand that wields them cannot.

They can be trained in extremely crude terms, at least to not instinctively attack a certain person or group of persons, but they must be constantly fed. They can learn the command 'kill', probably. It is unclear if the Dogs really learn it or if that's just what they want to do most of the time anyway. Some intelligent and evil beings have tried to train packs of Perspective Dogs to hunt their enemies. The results have been... irregular. Though at least they do not require much space, as they have a small, strange world of their own in which to live.

They are mistaken most often for flies. A circle of black beings, buzzing and rotating in mid-air above the body of a rotting corpse.

But they do not circle in the hectic promenades of insect kind, but flow and spiral like the paths of sharks. And they do not fly, but seem to tread the air somehow on three-toed feet. The buzzing is a low alien growl, heard from very far away.

Perspective Dogs have access to a single direction in space that no-other form of life can use. The Dog Dimension. This is where they live and lair, the base from which they hunt.

You can see them there. They look as if they were simply very far away. A couple of hundred yards in the distance. But, should you walk around the space they're in, and see it from the other side, they still seem very far away, and so it is if you see them from below, or above, they are distant from you in a direction you cannot go.

Then, if they notice you, the circling stops, their flat heads raise up, the blank white eye roll. They run towards you. Like something rushing down a tunnel along tracks, getting bigger and bigger, they plunge into reality and attack.

Whatever Perspective Dogs are they are certainly not dogs. They are about the size of a very large greyhound and have the greyhound's speed. The upper teeth are just like pins, the lower teeth are edged. They pierce and saw. Their jaws cannot move side-to-side so they must grip and shake their prey madly like a crocodile to tear off chunks of meat.

The eyes are blank, white pupil-less circles located oddly on the side of the head. They have no ears. Each has a short stubby scorpion tail. Far too short to threaten anything at the front of the animal, most fighters forget about it, dealing with the front. Then, unexpectedly and almost randomly, the Dogs kick up their back legs high into the air with the front legs on the ground, and sting their enemy right in the face. The poison can be deadly.

PHOENICEOUS WINGS

They are beautiful to look upon, with the grace and ferocious indifference of an annihilating star before it dies. Each wing is an incarnate fragment of burning artistic inspiration.

Some flit like moths, others are as large as birds or bats. The greatest challenge eagles in their size. Wings, linked but torsoless, hinged like the leaves of a book partially split from the pagehead down the spine. The wings are always different, jagged and ragged and razor sharp, no two shapes the same. Tails wave behind them like the tails of kites, marking their own sines. They loop like motes of light behind the eye--trapped flies or sycamore seeds falling through cold air--dashing back and forth, fast and semi-random.

"A feudal battlefield with torn and magisterial flags; a meadow of mirrored flowers in spring, the shockingly gory remnants of a recent corpse: none match the colours of the Wings. They exceed in range, intensity and variety--overridden, the words employed to pin them down. And they are Bright. I have seen flammeous sights: griseous like the dying dawn, flavescent-yellow, gleaming zinniber, heliotrope and gold. Circles--symmetrical, mirrored on each side--make common patterns on the Wings. The colours of the circles and the surrounding wings are off opposed and it is rare to see a monochrome device--most vary finely, counterposing shade and tone. Could it be they grow with age? Some Phoenixeous Wings have one, some two and a rare few have rows of up to six. But what meaning could time have in a place where time will never pass?" - Zenithal

The Wings do not fly like any creature of this world because from this world they do not come. They come from the ferocious world of dreams. There uncounted thousands of them flock and squall, trying desperately to get inside and infect living beings.

"Perhaps a motile stage of life for forms of thought, that, colonised, make up the conscious mind." - Zenithal

"A tome. A thing whose shadow cast is thought. As men might look upon their own description in the written word, and smile to see themselves so coded in this chain of sounds and see their shadow overlook the page, so something higher up may look upon the thoughts of men, its shadow bright, not dark." - Leptoblast

"A fungus of the mind. Overawed by colour? Why? You look upon a parasitic thing Organic and derivative of something else. A spore. No more, I have no doubt, in the world where it is from." - Ashkott

The Dreamons are the shepherds of the Wings. They guard the vast and churning flocks, keeping them back from the borders of our understanding. There is no shortage of inspiration out beyond the walls of space and time; there is enough to burn the heart of the world and drive every living being insane with the hunger to create. A plague of Phoenixeous Wings can lead to cities going mad or villages starving to death as everyone tries to create the artwork-burning up their skulls from the inside.

Sometimes, artists sharpen their minds enough to briefly cut through the surface of the world and the guard the Dreamons set upon it. They let through a Phoenixeous Wing, one that enters so swiftly and violently it is scarcely noticed. The Wing gets inside its victim and expands fractally, taking up as much cognitive space and action as it can. If the sufferer can encapsulate the idea in material expression, in stone or colour or wood or words--at speed--then they will freeze the Phoenixean Flame in their head. They can then access the complex surfaces of its decaying corpse inside their mind as it slowly fractalises into splinters and dissolves. If they are not fast enough, or cannot catch the form, the Phoenixeous Wing expands inside their mind, unfolding and colonising their interior thoughts. They become little

more than a living puppet of the art they are to make.

make.

Only when the Dreamons are enraged, or need desperately to find someone that they can find no other way (if for instance they refuse to sleep), will they deliberately release the Phoenixeous Wings. A single flock, no more. Somewhere, an artist dies. The Phoenixeous Wings explode out from their body in a storm of colour, flesh, and blood. They hunt the Dreamons target. When they find it they will try to enter in. The victim is consumed by the desire to make the art embodied by the Wing. They will do this above all else, making them easy to track down--but should this fail to work, they may be simply sliced to pieces by the wings of the flock.

PICEOUS PUCCOON

A fat albicant bug, white and slathering. All desire the silk of the Puccoon.

Like a big caterpillar, holding its head as high as you are tall, but fat, the mass of multiple cows. Its snow-white body longer than a man can leap. The torso vertical and lined with three dark-umber pseudodactyl flipper-limbs per side. It uses these to gesture, grasp and squeeze. Its head a pure nigricant black.

Intelligent, unpleasant and economically-aware, the Piceous Puccoon is primarily a merchant and maker of deals. In the tips of ruined towers or the dark boles of vast and ancient trees, it makes its lair, a market-fortress strewn with silken flags. For those who live beyond the law, or those feeding extra-legal hungers and desires, the place of the Puccoon is one of few locations safe to meet and make exchange.

The Puccoon itself ensures order with its debt-guards. These are thieves, killers and scoundrels of every kind, trapped in webs of intersecting debt. Their service signed away, and cleverly traded by the Puccoon so that, should it die, each of its employees will find themselves suborned to those they hate the most. So they obey and kill in mutual contempt, richly attired in rented clothes, feasting on borrowed luxuries, slowly sinking deeper into debt, desperate to protect the Puccoon and avoid their service being traded to their foe. Over these, the Puccoon often sets Hex Dragons to strike at its opponents and see its will enforced.

The main protection of the Puccoon is not its strength in arms, but exactness, the bond of its word and the fact that nothing else can do what it can do. The Puccoon produces its own silk, squeezing it from a secret gland. Silk in many colours. This keeps it in the black. Even robbed of everything, it still has something left to trade.

The Piceous Puccoon has one thing it loves more than keeping somebody in debt, more than it loves gold, its hardest currency of trade, a food it hungers for above all else: the hair of young girls. Very young. The girls must not have reached puberty and the hair must be actively growing from their heads. The Puccoon grabs these girls, grasps them in its pseudodactyls, and gnashes madly at their hair. There, enveloped in the belly flesh of the Puccoon, they cringe away from its vile mastication and cry out when, in its passion, the Puccoon cuts and scars their scalp with its hungry jaws. The blood drips down their face and mixes with the Puccoon-drool.

The Puccoon does no particular damage to the girls. (Other than the trauma of their captivity and contact with it.) Once bald, it has no interest in them and they are cast aside. This still leaves them in the middle of wherever the Puccoon is, surrounded by whomever it is with, and with no gold-price keeping them alive. A poor fortune indeed.

All the silks squeezed out by the Puccoon are beautiful, but some are more-than-normal. They hold strange colours and fall in folds around the body without reference to their weight or the position of the ground. To make these silks, the Puccoon must eat the certain-coloured hair of many girls, (at least a hundred with locks of the same shade to make a useable amount of silk).

Girls with red or ginger hair produce erythaen silk, which holds the power of flame like glass holds light. Fire can be reflected and absorbed, then shaken out like dust flung from a cauldron.

Dark girls stripped of hair can fuel Melanic silk. This, when woven as a cloak and hung upon a wall, cuts open a dark portal, a gate through which no light may reach, that leads to the closest wall darker than the place that it is hung. A dangerous escape, for it goes always into greater depth or deeper night.

Blonde girls make Xanthic yellow-golden silk. It holds always the light that shines from gold, no matter what gates or density of dark and lightless earth may bar the way. The closer to gold it is, the more it shines, and the greater gold awaits, the brighter is its glow. In a pauper's hands it would be nothing more than dull cornflower faded in the sun, yet when near or in the midst of a great hoard, it burns like a golden dawn. This silk is of most use to those who have the least, but desired more by the rich. Wealthy potentates may keep their gold locked safely out of sight, yet, clad in Xanthic silk, still gleam or glow in its reflected light.

The hair of one hundred sick and dying girls makes a grey cinerious silk, which makes the wearer invisible to death so long as it is worn. Some have claimed this silk, once worn, can never be removed or torn, making those who wear it loathe their horrid fate, crawling through the long centuries, seeking for a death that will not come. Others say that if even a single girl is saved and does not die, the garment so produced will have a flaw, a tiny warp that only death can see, and that death will enter through this flaw, not fairly or by chance as death might have come before, but angry, vengeful at the attempted slight, arriving in such a way as to crush the wearers hopes before their eyes.

Those who wish to trade with the Puccoon for its magical silks must provide, not only the one-hundred girls of the type required, but a significant cash-payment.

Or a debt.



PICKCHICKEN

OR THIEVES-EAGLE

The Thieves-Eagle is so stealthy that it may not exist at all. The adults have never been captured or clearly seen, it may not even be a bird.

Leptoblast: "They appear most like a big black chicken, but slimmer, with a clever head and feet like chicken hands. And also like a dog but not."

The eggs of the Thieves-Eagle are illegal and born locked. They are hard and very strong, the chick inside is so secure that they are simply left lying about in the glens, often in exposed and obvious zones.

Zenithal: "The challenge of the Pickchicken chick in escaping its own egg is the means by which the species secures and sustains its unnatural intelligence and stealth. The deliberate exposure of the egg may be an additional test. The Pickchicken wants its offspring captured. To escape first the egg, and then whatever lies beyond, ensures that only the most able young survive."

The egg of the Pickchicken looks much like a large white chicken's egg. On closer observation a gleam can be seen of etched and intersecting lines, like the laminated surface of a puzzle-locked box. And this egg is indeed sealed by cunning art. It is a prison for the chick inside. To access yolk and grow it must master and solve a series of puzzles and tricks and to be born it must understand the mystery of its construction in full.

If the egg of the Thiefbeast is kept cool, it can remain quiescent for months, when warmed, the chick wakes up. So, if an egg is placed, for instance, in the armpit of a human being, the embryo inside will wake and try to escape. Someone pressing their ear against a warm egg will hear a series of very slow clicks and shuffles as something inside is quietly worked. (No-one has ever solved a Pickchicken egg from the outside.) Eventually the shell falls neatly and elegantly apart, like a cleverly designed toy. The baby will emerge.

The young look an odd combination of things. They have small tails, two things which are probably legs and two more things which might be wings. Its head seems big for its body, like all young. There are two huge and staring birdlike eyes and a beak. Its tongue, with which it does its work, is slim, strong, long and black, with a trident tip.

The Pickchicken will imprint on the first person it sees as it leaves the egg. If that person then picks up the Pickchicken and gently puts its beak against the keyhole of a lock, the Pickchicken extends its trident tongue. It will then pick the lock. There is no material lock it cannot pick and it has a fair rate of success with magical and supernatural locks as well. It always avoids or deactivates traps.

The Pickchicken is intelligent, independent and matures quickly, over a number of days. It will not imprint on a person for long. After a short time it will cease responding to the urge to pick locks, then, without warning, it will disappear. It is also hard to keep alive as it eats only stolen food. Cultists, spymasters, enthusiasts and many many thieves have tried to keep and breed a Pickchicken. In every case the cage is found empty, unlocked from the inside, and the Pickchicken gone. No cage or cell can hold them.

The egg of the Pickchicken is used most often to aid in prison breaks. It can be smuggled quite easily in to a cell, is quite robust, and looks to most people like nothing so much as a big egg. A prisoner can take their time hatching the egg.

The eggs of a Pickchicken are enormously valuable, and totally illegal. Few know of them, and those who do are either criminals or agents of the law. In either case, possessing one can be as dangerous as useful. If an owner of an egg does manage to execute a sale without being arrested or killed, they can become very rich indeed.

POIGNANT MEN

"Fear the deadly sadness of the Poignant Men and fear again their twice-terrible speed." - Leptoblast

The Poignant Men are living spikes, as half as tall again as a giraffe, which is a very tall creature indeed. Slender-black, their skin is leathery and smooth, their feet are hooves. Their tracks can be mistaken for a horse's track, spaced impossibly wide. ("Check for the missing intervening marks and if you find them not then check above. Look up! Look up!" - Zenithal.) The limbs of Poignant Men exceed in length, they have a single-jointed leg which makes up at least half their bodies length and triple-jointed arms that can reach down almost to their feet. Their sad sad hands are spikes as well, sharp and slender at the tip. The hand-spikes of the Poignant Men have no true end, growing narrower and sharper as they go yet, if measured, never truly running out.

They have a written language of eighteen symbols made of dots. These can be inverted and re-arranged to give different meanings, the blind can often read these by touch.

They make pointillist art of fine silk of paper sheets, if provided for them, of sunsets or cities seen by night as if the living folk were lamps of light, or maps of invisible stars.

Where the arms and body meet is a featureless red pit, the eating eye of the Poignant Man. They feed sometimes on fruit, but more usually on little living things which they spear easily from the branches of trees, often at night. They can javelin a bat in flight on nights without a moon; they can find men in the dark, and other living things as well.

But they do not eat men, or anything larger than their mouth; they cannot tear or chew. Any food they catch is simply brought up to the eye, it closes once, the Poignant Man stays very still, the food is seen no more.

It is rare for them to acquiesce to teach the blade, they take no payment and whatever quality they seek cannot be reliably reproduced, but on rare occasions it has been done. The student must climb into the branches of a mighty tree while the Poignant Man stands near. They must leap from branch to branch and deflect their tutor's blows as they strike with lightning speed. The speed and precision of the Poignant Men is a swift and dangerous lesson. Not all survive, but those who do are famous for their riposte.

It's not clear if the Poignant Men have gender or how they reproduce but mated pairs are sometimes seen in spring with a gaggle of man-sized rapier-babies running after them.

All the Poignant men can do is pierce, and this may be the source of the slow madness that can consume them as the year winds down.

"I have seen them living quietly in their narrow homes. They like to stay in dried up wells, deep vertical holes and sometimes in ruined towers. They sleep standing up, the mouth-eye closed like curtains drawn and when they wake they climb quite slowly out.

It is a sight indeed to see a Poignant Man emerging from a well. Though the Poignant Men are speechless and by habit make no sound, it is the silence of attention, not contempt. To my surprise I found them sensitive, even gentlemanly beings. I never offered even small consideration but that it was returned with grace. If I bowed, they bowed nobly too. No hands were shaken but should I doff my cap they would perform a brief salaam, a custom of the eastern lands I think, most elegant, one hand to the heart then swept out in a graceful curve, accompanied by a nod. Though they never spoke I do believe they understood and one never left whilst I was speaking, or took any action to interrupt, but attended every word with calm restraint. Once, I was offered an apple, which I ate, mistakenly I think as I later realised that it is their custom to communicate through the complex patterns of piercings left on various things and that the apple, now I recall, seemed to have upon its skin a network of tiny holes. How I regret this embarrassing faux-pas! I wonder what the apple said?" - Leptoblast.

They are known to stand and look upon the dying sun, pausing in whatever they do to turn and watch it as it falls.

But they keep watching even once the sun has left the sky, as if, for them the sun was slower or blurred in its endless path. They will stop for a long time and stand motionless, simply to look upon old or dying things, even sometimes, leaves. This urge increases as the days grow short.

As Autumn ends and nights close in, some Poignant Men break into a kind of madness. They may stay very still for a very long time, then pierce people and run away, or dash towards a crowd and pierce everyone very quickly, often leaving a field of dead in a handful of seconds, in the centre of which they silently stand. Some stay motionless for months, till snow falls all around them, then burst into frantic violence.

If you see one standing silently in the winter light, stay back.

POTEMKIMEN

Potemkimen lie. They hunger for simulation. They hunt men with wooden ducks and fight elves with drowned knights. This hunger has no beginning and no end, it is a quality of their life, endlessly re-applied.

Their skin is not their real skin and their face is not their real face. They make costumes. Each one has a kind of overall of rags and reeds and whatever they can find and each one makes a mask, which only they can wear. In costume, they are about five feet high, with webbed hands and feet. The masks are of monsters: huge-featured faces with wide white eyes, earlike frills bursting from each side and a mouth made up of, or hidden by, slack and slimy tentacle frills.

If you tear a Potemkiman's costume, or rip off their mask, you will see underneath it, the features of a Potemkiman. A different one. You still can't work out how the mouth works. The Potemkiman will flee madly. They never fight or hunt head-on but only in disguise.

They are freshwater creatures of mist and moor and boggy cave. They lair in the centre of marshlands or under distant islands in the centre of grey tributaries and deep forgotten lakes.

They make things. From reeds or mud or wood or anything they can find. The things they make are simulations of the real. They commonly build ducks. They use the ducks to fish for men.

They hide just under the reflecting waters of a mere or marsh and allow the wood or wicker duck to float, tugging it gently to simulate life. The moment anyone tries to catch or grab the duck they will snag on hidden hooks or be looped in a noose that rapidly snaps shut. This done, they will be yanked down under the dark and drowned.

Ducks are common, but Potemkimen will fabricate almost anything to aid in the lure and capture of prey. They are good sculptors in reed and wood, clay and mud, and add a wide variety of natural materials to create specific effects.

They can build a deer with its head bowed to drink, the half-submerged body of a drowned girl, a treasure laden cart that seems to be sinking into the mire, a pale human hand reaching from a hole, and many other things. Anything they have seen they can simulate.

On islands of reed or moss, they build villages of wood and thatch. Though difficult to see from a distance as they are made entirely from natural materials, their small houses are neatly and carefully assembled and all different, each baring some particular touch of design. They stand in a regular circle around a central cooking pit.

They do not live in the village. They never live in it. They hide in hidden holes scraped from the mud and watch, carefully observing the simulated homes in case somebody comes the check them out. If anyone tries sleeping there they hunt them in the night. If no-one comes, the Potemkimen people the village with manikins of people doing people-things, then they watch some more.

When not building elaborate lures or empty homes or Potemkiman costumes the Potemkimen just build things. It's what they do with their free time.

When they get bored with a 'village' they build another one. The centres of desolate swamps, where no-one would ever choose to go, are populated by densely packed empty homes of reed. Intermixed ghost villages, some decaying into the water, some still fresh. If preserved and undisturbed they stretch for miles or empty pseudo-necropolis where the normal living action of the swamp goes on in the never-lived in streets.

To fight, Potemkimen build great war-puppets which they hide under the surface of the bog, yanking them vertically into place with hidden ropes in the face of danger. These range in size from a knight on horseback to gigantic bog-puppets as high as a house which they hoist laterally out of the muck, streaming with black water and dribbling eels. They are moved and manipulated by teams of Potemkimen working together with rods and ropes. Often, the structure of the war-puppet is made from the remains of a real version of whatever it was that drowned in the bog, so a giant puppet may be made of a real giants bones, or a knight puppet may be made from a real knights armour, and skeleton inside.

These constructions rarely act with anything like the effectiveness of the real version, but the Potemkimen move freely and well over and through marsh and lake and so the war-puppets they wield can act with more speed and effectiveness than the real, heavy, solid version could in the same conditions.

They swim well and need not come up for air. Victims can be mystified and frightened by the sight of a dead knight on a dead horse with false thews of reed but a real sword, looming from ripples of a lough and galloping across its still surface as they try to get away.

The Potemkimen are trapped in a brutal and long-standing territorial battle with the Bog Elves. A war difficult to either execute or resolve as no-one involved is entirely sure what is happening. Nevertheless, the two sides are firmly convinced they are at war, the exact shape or execution of that war being something of a mystery to both of them.



A flock of pigeons swoops through the broken windows of a city house and becomes a corridor full of naked blood-streaked men holding razors in their teeth.

They were Knights, once, in whatever home they once had, a silver land with ringing silver chimes and silver fish shining motionless in slow black streams under the light of the moon. That home is gone. They are a landless people now, clinging fitfully to life in the shadows of alien cities and the unwanted corners of towns that are not theirs. And those who were once knights, and trod the air in starlight on their quests, are knights no more. Much has been forgotten, and what has not been lost, lives on in dark corrupted form. Chivalry is profit now, honour is fear, duty is extracted on the cutting edge. Those who sought to serve now rule in secret with the threat of force. Once, the knights were guided by those somewhat more than men, voices out of legend, hearts unbound by shape or human desire.

Now, there are whispers of mutation, of terrible crippled inhuman things wheeled out to bark orders and spectate tortures, of little voices, things in curtained cages, obeyed to the letter as if they were the word of god.

The people, trapped in an alien land, voiceless, futureless, with no way home, cried out for their protectors. And some came. But changed, lessened, with much knowledge lost and the greatest heroes dead. They tried their best. They made the choice to live, to remain themselves regardless of the cost, not to sputter out or blend invisibly into this new world. They resurrected the old forms as well they could and called for a new generation to risk great sacrifice so that their people would be safe in these strange lands. But time worked on them, and power, once held in public, now became a secret thing. Wealth, once cast laughing from the silver spurs of chevaliers, now became the very web of life, always slipping away and desperately held. And the old ways are not what they were. They have been branded criminals in every city where they live, but in their own tongue the name they use is 'Knight'.

They rule invisibly over certain sections of the city streets, and seem to know more than they should. Their intelligence networks are famed and feared, few things escape them and those who betray them die wherever they hide. The attackers are never caught, no witnesses ever come forth.

POYAZUKA

The method of the ritual is this:

The loyalty of an initiate must be proved, a monster must be killed. There are no monsters in the cities now, but there are enemies, many many enemies. Policemen, Judges, witnesses, those who would betray their people. A single death will do. They are brought to a secret place at a certain time, it must be underground, with walls of bare earth, and lit by the light of a gibbous moon. They are stripped, smeared with pigeon blood and placed in the centre of a circle in the middle of the room. The Knights gather and begin the whispered chant. During the whole of the ritual, no-one may speak above a whisper or make any louder sound, or they must die..

The head of the clan comes forth. They are always horribly changed. They traverse the circle, whispering. (If immobile they are carried). A flock of common pigeons flies down out of the light of the moon and lands. They will not leave. The initiate must silently catch a pigeon and shove the whole thing, alive, down their throat. A special silver stick is allowed to assist with this. (If the stick is not pure silver the initiate will die horribly.) This is the only other thing allowed in the circle other than pigeons, whispers, moonlight and blood. The initiate will convulse. The whispering must not stop. They must not leave the light of the moon. After several hours the initiate will transform into a common city pigeon.

From this day on, they will have the power to transform themselves into a pigeon, and back, at least once a day. As they grow more powerful more frequent transformations can be tried. Neither the human, or pigeon form have any special magical qualities. Nothing the Poyazuka wear will change with them. Many carry small razor blades on elastic neckbands, hanging down the centre of their spine, or, more traditionally, placed in their teeth whenever they change. The pigeon carries the razor either between its wings, or in its beak, when it changes back into a man he emerges with the razor still attached or carried. The ability to carry the razor in the mouth through the horrors of the transformation without cutting yourself is a respected one for Poyazuka, and indicates high status. The classical Poyazuka honour duel took place in flight, the first to touch the ground would bow their head. More recently they fight as men, naked, with only razors for weapons.

Some do not pass cleanly. They emerge changed. With the forms, or scale of bird and man horribly blended. They might be a pigeon with human arms and a human mind, a crippled man with the skull, face and eyes of a gigantic bird, a woman whose flesh tears open, revealing feathers, a hairless gasping pigeon chick at human scale with the voice of a thinking being. These beings are always exulted by the Poyazuka. They are always more cruel and violent than the rank and file, daring and forcing their subordinates into new acts of violence and fear. For them there is no way out, they can never leave and human pleasures and a human life are now denied to them. In most cases they can never fly or taste the freedom of the air.

Ghastly rumours grow around the Poyazuka wherever live. It is said they have a lust for dark violence and deviant and troubling sexuality. That they twist the culture of that place. That they entrap the weak and wicked strong in acts of disturbing bestiality. And some, or all, of this may be the case.

PREDATOR SAINT

This is the dream of the thing watching you from the dark. It has followed you since the beginning and it lives within you now.

There might be a reason for it, a starving madman runs into a group of hunters far from home and thrusts the bloodied skull of a beast into their hands, a terrible accident take place or a dark deed is done and then concealed, leaving a scar of secret guilt. Sometimes there can be no reason at all, the Saint just comes.

They come to places cut off from the world, isolated, locked in conflict with the encompassing wild, and it begins with a disappearance. Someone walking in the woods does not come back. And the animals attack. Vaguely at first, without a pattern: songbirds hurl themselves at children, a family pet goes mad, a farmer is found trampled by his Ox. The natural animals of the surrounding land become inimical to man, they lose their fear, no matter how small they may be. Rats do not flee the light or dogs cringe from thrown stones. The apex beasts now exclusively hunt man, the pyramid of life inverts. This happens slowly, like a slim wire spooling round a sleeping neck. The forest tightens round the glade, the people now are trapped. They cannot leave.

Fear rules now. Faith in gods and local spirits dies. A worm of thought is cast, and finds one particular mind. This person skins a skull, flenses a beast-face, and the blood never dries, it stays wet, drips, and gleams darkly in the light. They rip an idol's head, smashing it from the shoulders of an old familiar god, and there they place the skull. The village wakes from tortured sleep to find a new god watches through black eyes. Sometimes the local priest is killed, sometimes it is the priest that builds the saint. The darkness has a focus now and an embodied self.

The people turn to fearful worship of the skull, a thing now cloaked in potent supernatural fear. Only those who serve the Saint are suffered to approach, any other coming near is flattened to the ground by overwhelming dread. As the community attends, it looks on them with empty eyes and one-by-one it puts itself into their hearts.

But, though real, the Saint still cannot kill; it has little power to physically affect the world. It can drive animals mad but it cannot pick up a knife, close a lock or spin a top, it must work with what it finds within the human heart, and it must feast on flesh in dreams.

Each night after the idol is raised the Saint will get into a sleeper's dreams and hunt them down. It chases them to death in the shape of their darkest fear. As the dream-self falls, fear stops their hearts. Sometimes the doomed one flees dreaming, racing blindly from their bed, still asleep and screaming. Sometimes wounds of an impossible death appear upon their flesh once life has left.

Those who serve the Saint well are always left till last. Those who disobey or fight back are killed first. This creates the impression that worship of the thing can succeed, that loyalty can buy life. It cannot. Everyone will die, in time.

In daylight the chief threat comes from the cult of the Saint. Those who serve it freely are always the worst. Now they rule the people through reflected fear, taking everything they ever wanted and were denied. They will fight to maintain the structure of power to which they have sold themselves. Sometimes the entire village will join, then, tying newcomers down for the New God's food in hopes of escaping another night.

To take on the Saint, either its idol must be smashed, or it must be fought and defeated in dreams, but when the Saint hunts you it does so with every weapon of your own rebellious mind and few have ever won. Those who can find a way to share their thoughts in sleep may stand a chance; the Saint can only be one fear at any time. Some say the most cunning thieves can find the gaps in their own dreams, and escape their own mind in the night to burgle those of nearby friends, allowing them to share the same dream, and the same danger.

Usually, all that remains is a lone murderer running through the forest, clutching a bloody skull, listening to a pounding voice that only they can hear, ready to press the smiling thing into the first fresh hands they find.



PRIEST-OF-HOOKS

Like a Priest they come in sunlight, in the middle of the day, and know your name.

"The Priest-Of-Hooks A name bestowed by regular observance of the time. It's visits lie along that point of day when many faiths hold their services and gather in their prayers. When they arrive they come destroying in a whirl, yet their enquiries are familiar. Much like the Priest of some alternate forgotten faith, waiting violently just out of sight. And of course, because of its halo of hooks." - Leptoblast

The Priest is large, ferocious, bright bright red (the mass of three bears end-to-end - L) and long, worm or snake-like with no limbs and a single head. The mouth inside the head is huge, with rows of sharp serrated teeth. Arranged around its mouth are eyes shining wetly, up to nine or ten, and though generally roughly evenly arranged their spacing does seem somewhat slapdash for a sensing organ.

"I think its transit through the world so rapid, careless and without thought, and its battles so continuous and fierce, that it loses eyes a-piece, one or two at a time, and that they continually re-grow as shark-teeth do. No doubt a Priest-Of-Hooks that goes too long without some chaos and a fight would simply be bestrewn with unwanted and unnecessary eyes." - Z

This means the Priest-Of-Hooks has no real 'up' or 'down' as such. It can be hurled onto its 'back' and go directly on. Its orientation can be described as 'hooks up', with the halo of hooks running above its mouth, or 'hooks down' with the halo running below the mouth.

The Halo of Haematic Hooks runs all around the creature in a line. They are a kind of unknown bone, metallic, strong and sharp, as well as light. (Haematic Hooks are valued highly by fishermen seeking legendary prey, or hunters hunting quarry strange and wild. Nothing can escape the hook once caught, or so it's claimed.) Each hook is crook'd and a little less than a foot long.

"All the hooks orient the same way, either clock or anti-clockwise. They can spin in an instant, shifting as one to reverse their run. The means by which they move is a source of speculation and debate. Like the true position of a running horses hooves, they are too fast for a human eye to see, generally perceived as a murderous blur, unless they momentarily pause when their direction shifts. They move like limbs, twisting and turning, skittering quickly but never truly changing the position of their joint." - Zenithal.

"Like a loop of rope or a spinning cartwheels rim, they are simply shifted at enormous speed around the body from head to tip in one long continuous flow". - Leptoblast

Whatever its means, the hooked halo gives the Priest-Of-Hooks a murderous weapon and mode of transport in one. It can move in the sinuous manner of the snake, looping its long body with several points of contact with the ground, but, should it roll onto its side, its hooks meet the earth and the Priest can dash rapidly side-to-side by changing the direction of their flow. The fluid mixing of these modes makes the movements of the Priest almost impossible to track. It may approach, shift side-to-side faster than the head can turn, looking for a flank to take. The hooks protect it from all directions, they can tear a man apart, let it rip into wooden walls and rage through bushes and trees, fountaining wood as it ruins its restraints. It can climb via hooks as well, in rather an odd way.

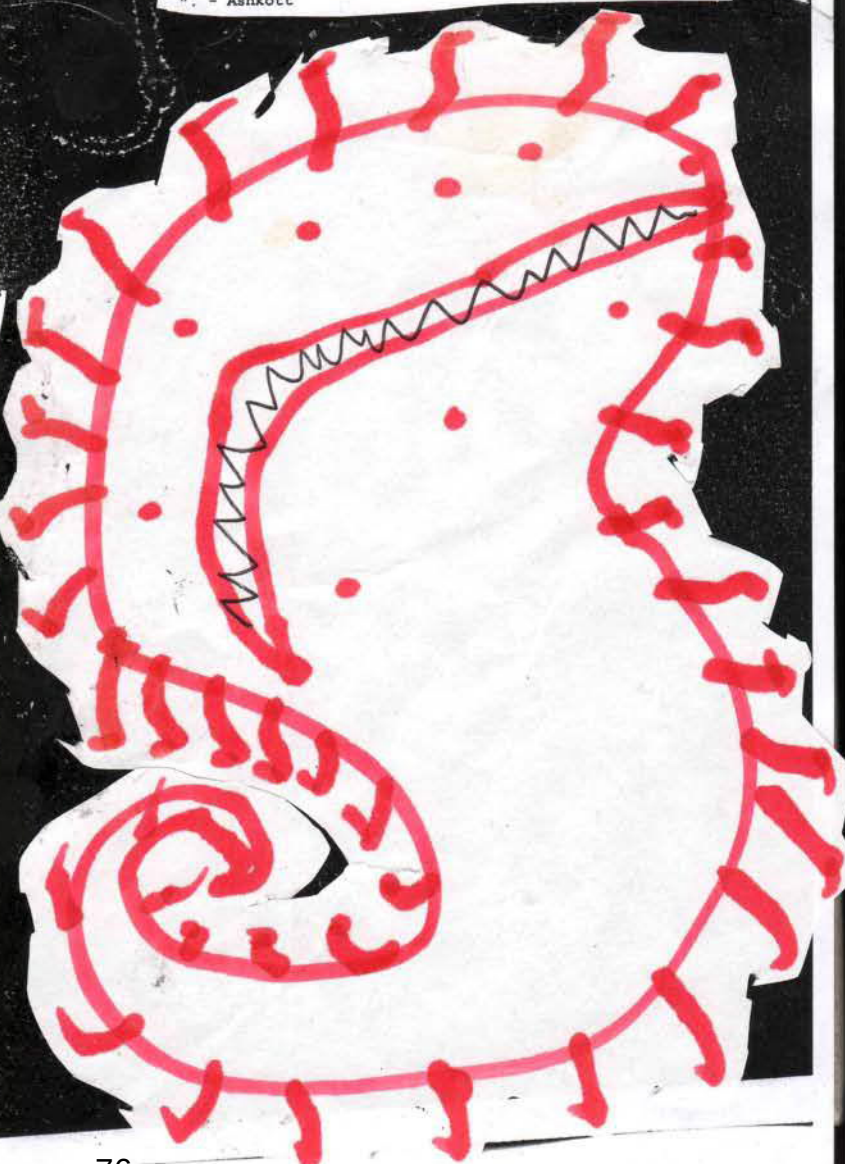
The Priest is shameless, fearless, regular and never stops. It is moving or attacking all the time. Or moving and attacking. It may be that it has no lair and never sleeps at all, that its apparent regularity is simply a consequence of its never-ending death-to-death migration. Though, it has never been recorded as attacking in the night. Only in the day and preferably also in bright light. It must go somewhere, and do something in the night, but nobody knows what.

The Priest-Of-Hooks is always making sound. Moaning, screams, a list of chundering sub-verbal names like a madman reading from a note. It knows the people it attacks somehow and speaks to them by name in words choked out from its deep, black, broken-bear voice. There may be simple questions about basic things, shoes, or food, travel or the price of corn, never more than a few words long. This quixotic social intelligence seems to have no other use. It never does anything else subtle or complex, but just attacks. The answers to its questions or its calls have no effect, it goes relentlessly on, no matter what you say or do.

No-one knows from whence this social information comes. Many suspect the Priest is in the service of some darker power, but, no evidence for this has ever been found. Its assaults have no particular pattern or plan, except their meaningless clockwork regularity.

"I strongly suspect the creature is covered with hooks. Not just the hooks we see, but more. Many many more. The shifting of the hooks we see is a simple re-arrangement of the hooks we don't. And these hooks. Catch thoughts, or fragments of them. Only a handful of flakes from the blizzard of thought. But what do people think of? Themselves. But each person only has one self. Not a great enough density of flakes of

Communal thought. There we see the key. When many think of one, in one location, at one time. Then a few random fragments of thought might give a time and place to hunt". - Ashkott



THE QUARYNX

A fearful thing, rare, magical, more dangerous and desired than the Unicorn, but promising, in its way, a symbol of white purity. Or death. It is a counter-hunter, only able to prey on those who hunt it first.

Lion-sized, a quadruped, with black or blue-black melanic fur. It has two tall and slender ears that stick up like two spikes, straight from its head. These ears hear many things. The Quarynx is strong, its torso and shoulders muscled enormously, the rear tapers to slim, powerful legs. The rear feet of the Quarynx look almost like simple human feet. Its front feet look like black-furred human hands. It rarely grips with these or uses them to wield, but only walks, graceful, silent and fast, its fingered feet gently and purposefully finding the path. Its touch caresses the earth like a sculptor feels their clay. The tracks of the Quarynx can be easily mistaken for those of two men walking strangely, one going forwards on their hands while the other, behind them goes on bare feet and holds the feet and body of the first off the ground. The hands can strangle though and that is how the Quarynx kills its prey. With its hands around their throat, face-to-face, at the end of a long hunt.

The head, and face, are a strange and frightening sight, if your luck is running thin the creatures face may be your own.

The thickly muscled shoulders of the Quarynx bear a head shaped and sized like that of a man. The head holds a face. The eyes are always dark, the lips are slightly parted. The face is always still and its expression does not change. The face is always a blank niveous white and looks as if it might be bone, or a stiff silk mask. The features on the face are not its own. They belong to someone else, a particular person.

This person is often a hunter, usually, but not always, a man. They are always a character of potency. They are strong and brave, or fierce and driven, violent people. They are one whose capacities imprint themselves on those around. They are one who enters first the room. They are those who dare. They are respected by the many. They are held in esteem by the simple people of the town.

The Quarynx is a living expression of the inner darkness of that one whose face it holds.

Anyone who sees their own still white face staring back from the head of a Quarynx is instantly consumed with a passion to hunt and destroy it. They know, in some deep unspoken way, that to hunt and kill the Quarynx is to chase down and annihilate the darkest aspect of their own selves. The more forthright and heroic the individual in question is, the less able they are to tolerate the darkness in their own soul the more obsessive and ferocious their chase will be. They simply cannot tolerate its existence in the world. One or the other must die.

Even for those of a calm and neutral temperament, the knowledge of the Quarynx nags at them constantly, a kind of living wound they can never let go. Like an important memory hovering on the edge of thought, yet never cohering.

No-one knows what evil people feel on observing their own, white, death-mask face on the body of a savage beast. Perhaps it makes them laugh. Perhaps the Quarynx never has their face. It might be that knowing that something in the darkness mimics them, and draws its power somehow from their own soul, enrages them and draws them by a different lure to the same doom.

Even news or rumours of the Quarynx carry some of this compelling drive. Those who hear tell of a beast holding their face are hooked by curiosity, at first, and then a nagging worry which grows and grows and can only be released by seeking out the thing and seeing, first hand, if it does indeed wear their seeming. Some try to escape even knowledge of the Quarynx. The moment the stories start, they flee to another district, another country, another life. But no matter how far they run, the Quarynx will follow, at a distance. It will never chase them, it will let itself be seen and the rumour and story of its face drift after them and surround them, and eventually, they will come to it.

The Quarynx is deadly, but it can only feed on the flesh of those who hunt it out of choice. Which makes it completely safe, so long as the meeting is an accident. The moment you actively seek one out, your flesh becomes palatable to it and the longer your search goes on, the more delicious you become. The Quarynx can survive on those prideful or stupid enough to seek it even though theirs is not the face it wears, but the one it truly hungers for is that particular person whose features it counterfeits.

To kill the Quarynx is to kill the darkness in the human soul and when a Quarynx dies the evil in the heart and mind behind the face it mimics will die too. Anyone who can successfully hunt and kill a Quarynx wearing their own face will destroy the darkness within themselves. And anyone killing a Quarynx bearing the face of another will change the soul of that person. They will become Good. The evil they have done will remain within the white empty head of the beast.

But the face will not decay. This person may walk the earth if they wish, doing good deeds, but the white mask of the Quarynx will remain as a symbol of all they are not, of all they deny. Are they truly good? Or just half a person that persuades themselves they are a whole?

To own the Quarynx mask of such a one is to hold a strange kind of power over them.

If they place the creatures face upon their own, they are restored. In this case they gain complete self knowledge. None who do this remain unchanged, but its results are impossible to predict. Many great Saints and great Monsters have been blamed on the hunting of the Quarynx and its consequences.

But more usually those who hunt do not return, the Quarynx is fierce, silent, cunning and fast, and it holds all the capacity for harm of the one whose face it wears.

No-one knows if there are many, or few or one. No-one knows if the Quarynx changes its face, or if each is born with only one. It is a creature of myth and terror and to encounter one is to slip into the world of legend and tales.

QUJRST

The flags of Qurjst are tongues licking the air. It is alive, horribly, beneath the soil. Its walls are cartilage and its foundations are of bone, its limbs are bridges and its corridors are open throats.

Qurjst is one of the Horizon Towns, the towns beyond sight, each different and each found by secret ways. Qurjst is an open secret; everybody knows it is a living thing. Opinions differ on what kind of living thing it is. Some say a gargantuan worm, projecting miles under the earth, with only the tip of its town-shaped nose exposed. Other stories claim that Qurjst expands from somewhere else, its flesh folding impossibly from some other zone, carried away then pressed again into the surface of the world in a different place, that Qurjst circles the world continually, nosing against it like a wolf chewing at the corners of a door.

Some say Qurjst is growing slowly over time, others say it shrinks.

How it works is this:

A red flag curls up through the earth and tangles in the air. The flag is wet and moves against the wind. A bulge forms in the soil, it crowns and breaks, the tallest tower of Qurjst emerges slowly from the ground. The towers of Qurjst are coloured like a butchers shelf, red striated muscle, pink meat, pale cartilage and gleaming bone.

Then a second, then a third, all around emerge and extend the revetments of flesh. Doors of bone and sphinctered portals crest the broken ground. The towers thicken from their narrow points. The suburbs clamber out: tumescent slums that thicken round the Qurjst-towers base. Not every home-cyst has a door of bone. This close to the ground, some portals are of wood, carpenter'd like normal doors, adapted to the walls of flesh.

Not every home is fully part of Qurjst. Some are weird survival-sheds, attached to Qurjst with chains and hooks like hovels stapled to a whale. Some of the wooden doors have breached, cracked and broken in; the empty rooms are scoured within. Some of the chains are empty, hooks have snapped, attachments broken off. Wherever Qurjst goes beneath the ground, whatever dark chthonic sea it rides, it is not safe.

Something carried in the towers, behind the doors of bone, in Qurjst-proper, will survive the trip. Something hanging onto Qurjst, or only just attached, may not.

Finally the shaking earth subsides, the towers scab and dry in the cool air, or bleed a little in the rain. The limbs of Qurjst extend, bridges snapping open like saluting arms to link the towers above the ground. The doors of bone unfold, the Qurjstors venture out to see the world. They beckon happily. Within are rib-cage halls and winding tracts, black eusophageal rooms where stolen wealth of every kind is stacked.

Qurjst is a city of thieves, the ultimate escape no outside law can reach. "There's always Qurjst" they say, whenever things go wrong, and they're right, there always is. If you can find it, you can stay. The only government of Qurjst, is Qurjst.

The economy of Qurjst is theft and extra-legal things. All thieves have heard of Qurjst and as soon as it emerges from the ground, the messages go out. Soon, from every compass point, in ones or twos or caravans of crime a cloud of scoundrels closes in on Qurjst. Dark pavilions bloom around the slums of meat. A raucous market grows where anything at all is bought and sold.

And soon, as if shadowing the thieves, comes law.

All governments loathe Qurjst, home of untrappable radicals, traders in slaves and contemptible drugs, and want it dead. As soon as its location is found out, forces muster, promises are made and aims are set to trap and wipe out Qurjst for good.

It never works.

Before the siege begins the Qurjstors will announce "It's time to leave!"

You have a second now to choose, escape, or stay?

Outside Qurjst thieves scatter like a flock of frightened birds, amongst them swoops the oncoming arm of the jaw. Within, there are the built cysts, the manufactured homes attached to Qurjst, or the rooms with wooden doors. The prices there are steep and the journey may be long, and dark. Or will you try the doors of bone?

Qurjst takes no taxes and it has no entry fee. To ride with it beneath the earth, is to be safe forever more.

Few mortal powers can touch you, inside Qurjst.

The Qurjstors, those who ride, will welcome you. They seem happy, whole and well fed, oddly attired, as if woken suddenly from bed. All are enthusiastic about Qurjst, "A beacon of liberty" they say. Though they are somewhat short on details.

And they have something extra too. Each Qurjstor has a grey-pink tube of flesh which grows out from their neck and disappears down beyond the doors of bone and below the sphinctered gates, no non-Qurjstor has ever seen its end. If you ride beyond the doors of bone when Qurjst sinks below the ground, when you emerge, you will be a Qurjstor too.

RAPTOR CHEVALLIX OR VALKYRAPTOR

The titian Centaur-Saurians arrive coming like sunrise on a burning field. They hate nothing, fear nothing and are immune to all the petty evils of mankind. Greed, jealousy, envy and contempt find no purchase on their souls. And they do know that all living things that walk upon the earth are their rightful prey. They are truly noble beings. Nothing could be more beautiful, more glorious or more feared. Savage, wonderful and more bloody than a conquerors dreams.

These astonishing combinations of form combine the toughness and aggression of a predatory saurian, the speed of a galloping horse and the wits of a far-seeing long-lived amoral amazon. They are extremely intelligent, ferocious, highly skilled and they eat people.

Sometimes. Not as a matter of course, but, maybe if they were hungry, or there were just too many humans around.

Ashkott adds this: "Though they all claim to be carnivorous, in fact they can survive on fruits and vegetables for some time. This is considered extremely embarrassing low-status behaviour. 'Fruit-Sucker' is a common insult."

They are the height of a mounted man. The main body and legs scaled and shaped like horse-formed lizard-beast of ancient times, and from its neck, the naked torso of a woman grows.

This flesh is armoured. The thickest plates along the back, gradually tessellating smaller moving to the feet and arms, on the human form the scales become so small, they are almost indistinguishable from skin.

Each has strong bony ridges rising up directly from its spine, and running up in smaller shapes onto its human neck. These defensive plates are longer than they are wide and rise directly up, like flames. The more violence a Valkyraptor survives, the larger and sharper its spines.

The tail has at its end, a savage cluster of sharp hooks or spikes which sweep easily with the force of a two-handed mace. The feet are all clawed and can be used to stab or kick.

Their hands are small, sensitive, exact and clawed. Their incisors are spiked and all their other teeth are sharp, but flat-across, like human teeth. They sometimes file these into points.

Their faces are always beautiful and scarred and the hair of their heads is hundreds of ultrafine feathers like the tail of a tropical bird. This hair can twitch independently, raise or lower when aroused, making it seem alive. It comes in every pigment of the plumage of birds and every Valkyraptor is exceedingly proud of her feathered mane. The scales of each Valkyraptor are differently coloured but most common are variations of flameous red and aurulent gold. Whatever the base colour the tonal variations look like the discolouration of living flame.

They could read and write if they wanted to learn, but few do. They can make and use weapons and tools, but rarely need to. They sing, in voices deep and soft, and their culture is written in their songs and passed this way. They love beauty, especially of worked weapons and young men. Often on meeting especially beautiful men they will caress and whisper to them, offering to carry them off for unknown purpose. They are oddly indifferent to women.

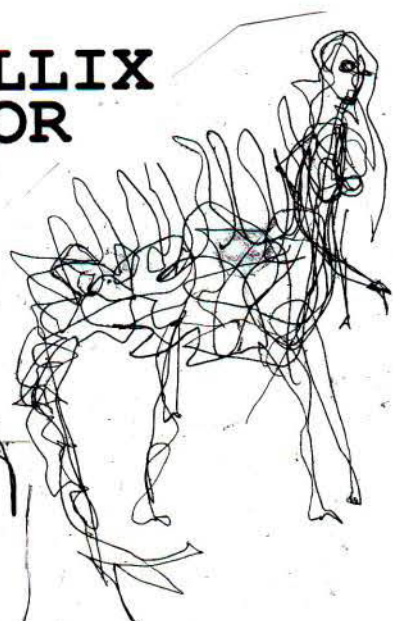
They come carrying bows, which they wield with skill and a far-seeing eye. Just as common are spears, javelins, bolas, nets and long piercing blades which they drive into the torso from behind as the target flees, hoisting them high and shaking the shaft so blood rains down, mingling triumphal singing with the victims screams. Shields are not used and armour rarely worn, but some older Valkyraptors clad themselves in fine brigandine and sweet examples of the armour-makers art.

They move restlessly across the plains, in war bands or small tribes, fearing nothing, regardless of the numbers or the size. Rarely, they combine and league in awesome hordes, striking terror into Empires, Titans and invincible beings. They do not build themselves, though could if they desired. Instead they sack or extort cities, demanding gold, gems and the most beautiful young men. These they seize and carry of whooping and laughing, they are never seen again. No-one knows how the Valkyraptors reproduce.

Should they happen upon a battle already begun, their spirit and contempt for fear may lead them to side with the losing side, purely out of joy and the danger of the deed.

Lebtoblast remarks: "They do recognise and respect, to a degree, qualities of Virtue, in the ancient sense, physical courage, élan in combat, grace as well as politeness and process in war, though this is more common of older leaders. young Raptor Chevallix are more irregular. If these qualities are combined in a male subject of unusual beauty, they can become quite engaging, though I find this puts the man in question in a privileged, frightening and rather dangerous position."

Ashkott takes a more practical approach: "They are killers. Fast, smart, ferocious and skilled, with a strong warrior culture and imbued with many natural tools of death. Do not fight them on their chosen ground. I recommend at least three experienced fully armoured knights against one Raptor Chevallix to guarantee the possibility, not the certainty, of a kill."



RIVER-SURGEONS

The River Surgeons will always negotiate, life for life. Yours, or another's.

They are probably fish. Bipedal, with a thick tail that turns smoothly into its torso like the tail and body of a newt. Short stumpy strong rear legs and exceedingly long sinuous forelimbs that reach from the shoulders all the way down to the ground.

The upper face and head are primitive, composed of one large bony plate, an un-refined form with a simple and savage-seeming jaw. Expressionless, the lower jaw moves only vertically, up and down, they cannot chew. There are sensing pits on the upper skull which could be ears and further curls on the back of the head that could be horns or strange organs of perception. Between the low shoulders and the bony head are a series of plates that shift like layered gorgets.

When you see them it's difficult not to imagine them in the water, the strong pointed head facing directly forwards, the forelimbs stowed smoothly along the sides, the whole thing rippling and curving fluidly fishlike as it swims. From a distance they look like giant primitive bone-headed newts. Then they reach the shore and stand up and waddle towards you and you see the face, and the jaws.

They are excellent healers and trauma surgeons. No other signs of culture have been found.

It is a great mystery. How, or when, or where did they learn this art? Many answers have been given. 'A race of corrupt Doctors forced as punishment into bestial shape' say some. 'Animals' say others, 'raised up by an ancient culture to doctor to its slaves'. Or 'just mutant newts with a weird cultural quirk'.

To summon the River-Surgeons, simply bleed into a river where they live. Before it hits the water, mix the blood with honey or with salt. Many living things bleed into the rivers and the Surgeons smell them all, blood alone is not a summons, the deliberate mixture of blood with honey or with salt is rare and distinctive enough that when they taste it they will know exactly what it means.

Depending on the river and its flow, they will come within a couple of hours. They will expect payment upfront. Payment consists of a large living warm-blooded thing, about the size of a large pig, or man, alive and tied up at the waters edge, incapable of fighting back. The Surgeons will snatch the creature away to the centre of the river, but keep it afloat, then, one or two will approach and climb out of the water.

They will commit one act of healing for each life offered. Their primary skills are trauma surgery and they will accomplish this quickly with their sharp front claws. Infections are dealt with by their saliva, which they drool all over any wound. More complex problems will require more thought. When thinking, the River-Surgeon sits, very still, at the patient's feet, looking at them and doing nothing. If a cure cannot be created from nearby plants and herbs, or delivered easily in a handful of grunted words, they will simply leave and return the 'price', still alive, to the river bank.

It's a good idea to bring a range of herbs and medical supplies to lay out by the patient's side. The Surgeons neither make nor carry tools, but they know what they are and how they work. They can smell or taste the medicinal properties of any organic substance after one exposure, even those properties so far unsuspected by man. Though their claws are scalpels they can use a needle and thread if one is presented.

Once the cure, or surgery is complete, they will return to the river, pull the 'price' underwater and eat it alive. The surgery always works.

As well as being doctors-for-hire, the River Surgeons are also apex predators for the freshwater environments where they dwell. They have no compunction at all about preying on intelligent beings. They will never take more than they need to live and are always willing to make a deal. If a group finds its self out off and outnumbered, they can buy their way out of trouble the same way they could buy healing. One living warm-blooded being, the size of a large pig, or man, tied up and helpless. Give them this and they will let you go.

Those who make their living by the river have a complex relationship with the Surgeons. Useful, fearful, monstrous, rational, reliable and savage. Everybody knows it's a good idea to keep the Surgeons fed, and everybody knows to keep back the fattest pig in case of sickness.

RUBIOUS FLUKE

A happy parasite on the nasty crackles in the human heart.

Intelligent and magical, they can change their size at will, though they prefer to be about an inch long and a fingernail-wide. ("It is well that they do for they live inside the brain."
- Z) A rubious ruby-red they are, as the name suggests, with a ring of azure eyes, evenly spaced. Their mouth opens like a five-petalled flower. Inside are layers of tiny teeth. Despite the odd articulation of their jaws they usually seem to be smiling. They can speak if they wish, in a high piping voice that echoes oddly in the listeners mind.

They eat emotion in its rawest form and make their homestead where it grows.

"The human brain! From reported conversations with the Flake, and from reassembling regrettable exploded heads, I have unveiled the seat of primal passions in the mind. They prefer, and curl around, a small nutty protrusion at the base and centre of the brain. This they call their 'feast', their cornucopia of nourishing thought, their ever-replenishing meal. And from this I deduce the self-same nodule is the source of those emotions and overwhelming primal drives: fear, disgust and rage. For it is on these they feed." - Leptoblast

The worm requires these emotions to survive, so quietly encourages the host to acts and situations where fear, rage and disgust would normally be felt. It then happily eats these feelings as they run through the mind but before they are expressed. The sensation is quixotic. The host experiences something that should make them angry, sick or scared. They feel... something, perhaps a memory or ghost of the old drive. Then the worm finishes its meal and they go numb, numb at least to these primary emotions, the host of a Rubious Flake is no longer afraid, no longer disgusted and generally not very angry. Other feelings, not eaten by the Flake, usually expand to take up the mental space.

The Flake-effect on human minds is difficult to predict. It depends on inner nature, on what's left inside the head when fear, disgust and rage have left. And on the opportunities to act. These are different for us all.

Very generally, good people get better, bad people get worse. The peasant does not fear their lord, those who hate the other no longer feel disgust. Some do good for sake of love and some from fear. If somebody's morality was based on fear then that morality is gone. The inner nature is pursued without the goad of fear or its restraint. Some become great heroes, others eat their neighbours. Potentially dangerous and horrid situations are sought out, and if they are not found, and if the base character is amenable, they may be made.

The Flake is reasonable and can be negotiated with. It can hear and see everything the host can hear and see. It will make a reasonable defence of its position. It cannot control the mind, only suggest. With a huge amount of self control the host can lock themselves into an utterly boring series of events in which no fear, disgust or rage are felt. If they keep it up for long enough then eventually the Flake will starve. If a situation is very desperate indeed the Flake will sometimes exit through the nose, grow to its full size, and battle in the host's defence, before trying to get back in its head.

The Flake prefers to live inside potent and capable types, they are more likely to survive the dangerous lifestyle that in quietly encourages them to have. But it can also enjoy fearful, angry or easily disgusted folk as they make a good meal. As it grows inside the head, the Flake magically adjusts its size, but this has limits. Should it survive long enough its lifecycle ends in one of three ways.

It can explode out of the skull in one go, killing the host. This is not preferred; it puts the Flake in danger and deprives it of a home. Though it can happen by accident if a host is exposed to staggering levels of other-natural fear, disgust or rage.

It can come to some agreement with the host, leaving it and sneaking off to crawl inside a bigger head. Something huge and mythical perhaps.

Or it can enter its reproductive stage.

In its reproductive stage the Flake impels its host to produce a particular effect. It seeks to create a grouping of images and ideas so distinctive and intense that they are carried into dreams. By tracing these dreams in the night the Flake can find the sleeping brains it needs to mate.

Its means of producing the effect are various. It will influence its host to mention, create, build, display and act out the idea whenever they can. When the host is sleeping, the Flakes desire to breed may be so great that it can take them over in their sleep, sending them stumbling about at its command.

This grouping must be something that would never normally be thought. For instance: blue burning giraffes. Or: a broadsword made entirely of eyeballs, stinking of mint.

When a target is consumed too much by this idea the Flake will find their sleeping mind. In their dream they will see a gigantic continent-sized worm with ruby eyes. The worm will ask them if they wish to live without fear. If they say yes, or agree in any way the Rubious Flake makes love to their brain in the night. After a few days a new small fluke is born inside the cranial folds.

Naturally the Rubious Flake wants to find the brains of people who will say yes. Its means of doing this are various. It may cause the host to haunt sewer workers, soldiers, surgeons, prostitutes. Or, if the host has become dangerously immoral they may simply inflict intense and negative emotions upon a captive mind, taking care to link the horrors to the Flakes idea-key. The more horrible the tortures and indignities become the more likely the captives are to say 'yes'.

SANGUINE CRANE

The Sanguine Crane is very beautiful, it drinks only blood and sucks secretly at wounds late in the night.

It's about four feet high, like a large conventional Crane, with translucent feathers and transparent skin. They glitter wonderfully in the evening or the dawn and the veins and inner organs of the Crane are clear to see. Though it stands exceeding still, its blood can be seen pumping, and the fluttering of its heart. To catch its prey, the Sanguine Crane makes use of just one claw, which it keeps poised and bent while it rests on the remaining leg. It strikes small target, then lifts them to its sharp, slender syringe-like beak. It ducks its head to quickly pierce the heart and drinks the bright-red arterial blood, which can be clearly seen getting sucked up into the Crane.

The secondary weapon of the Crane, and the means of its secrecy, is the single, long and motile feather of its tail. This translucent almost-invisible whip, weeps a numbing poison all the time, which condenses, at the tip, dripping slowly while the Crane awaits the movement of its prey. The Crane can cut a small animal with the edges of its tail, numbing them completely while it feeds. With larger targets, it can numb a section of their body while they sleep, preventing it from waking while the Crane pipettes its liquid meal. The speed and translucency of the tail make it hard to dodge indeed.

As the sun rises, staining the horizon white, the Crane alights soundlessly, seeking animals who sleep. A stroke of its poisoned tail will numb the flesh, the needle beak is driven in, aiming for the artery or heart. The Crane drinks deeply. Sometimes the pale bloodless bodies of large mammals or men are found un-waking on the ground before the sky turns blue. If the Crane has gorged too much, it may be hopping fatly away, too swollen to escape by air. Cranes generally hunt alone, limiting the damage they can do, but mating pairs are common in the summer months.

The Sanguine Crane is much admired by those with too much money, and those for whom too much is not enough. Cloaks and dresses of its feathers fetch a high reply in golden coin, wrangled into risqué translucent fashion trends and subverting, elegantly, codes of modesty designed to suppress vice.

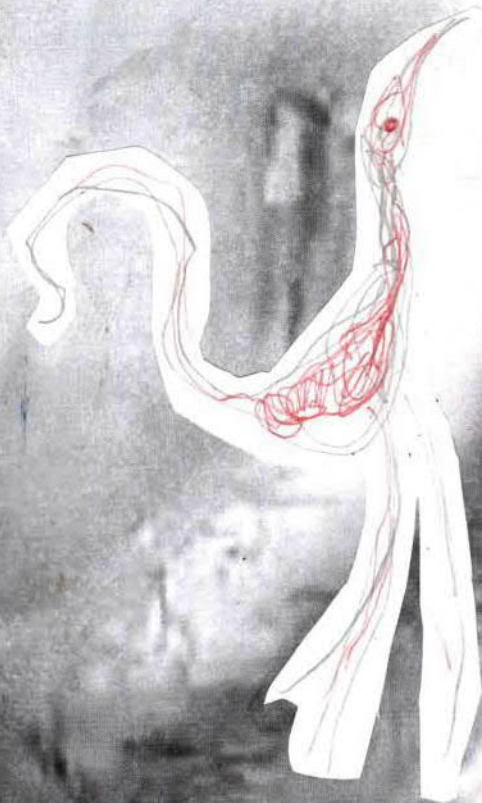
Considered emblematic is the Crane, through its vampiric habits and the grotesque beauty of its living self, of certain kinds of gorgeous and contemptuous wealth. Badges of aristocracy in all its aspects, good and bad. ("Source of the popular Jukai malapropism 'Aristokracy' - L) They show up in the heraldry of recent noble lines and are burnt in effigy by revolutionary mobs. Possessors of a live and captive Crane are among the elect indeed, and often among the despised as well.

("Crane eggs are translucent as the Crane itself and beautiful indeed, the foetal crane can be seen developing in the reflective deeps. I observed this, (from a distance, I was unable to get very close to the lady in question) in a living egg, incorporated into a piece of jewellery, made to set off an outfit of translucent Crane feathers and flammeous silk. An impressive social coup and a rather depressing waste of natural wonder." - 2)

Walking a pair of Sanguine Cranes on a golden leash is a sign of not only the greatest wealth, but the least possible shame.

The toxin that seeps slowly from its tail can have a secondary effect on larger creatures that survive its touch. They may find themselves imbued with a kind of irreverence towards danger and death, and a hunger for the violent act, violence is beauty for them now, until the drug wears off. This quality exists so that, should the crane miss its mark on the initial strike, the target will find itself drawn back into the danger zone, to gaze upon the crane once more, caring little for its life.

The sale of Crane feathers or their toxin as a drug is illegal, and commands a high price from the aristocrats that make up its primary market. More vital in the eyes of some, Crane toxin opens social doors to scenes that would otherwise be closed.



SARCOLINE REDEEMERS OR NAVIGATING CRABS

These creatures have been cursed by the sea from which they spring.

Redeemers haunt the shore. Found on stormy cataclysmic lines of broken stone, cliffs and caves attacked by waves and the punishing tide. They hang, clambering and leaping happily from perch to perch while the sea broils its wrath, attending to their steps and waiting for a mis-timed slip.

Fearless of the storm and spew, tsunami-bound they drop and slide into the sea-swell, hugging the curve of the carrying wave, letting it dab them back onto the rock-ledge where they leaped, clinging on, then falling more for fun.

Often they migrate. They cannot let the sea catch up with them for long. Before the seasons done they will move on. They will swim from shore to shore, or even range long pathways over land, seeking out a living spot where the tide bites at the rock.

They seem semi-intelligent at first, and sometimes use improvised tools, but, clever and suspicious, they are not easily observed, and will dumb-play to delude the viewer. Hard to trap, distract, fatigue or fool, they are a grim foe to those whose cold inner eye decries their smiles and childlike masks.

In their accustomed crouch they are the size of big fat boys, but upright they can reach five feet in height. They are shelled in sarcoline-pink, whose vividness varies from cooked lobster to temperate-skinned mankind, but their body shape is that of a short-limbed dog. Or a thickset ape, squat and strong. The tail is newtish, running directly along the bodies length and poking out a bit behind.

The limbs along its front are long like arms of apes, articulated like a careful crabs. Two fingers grasp. The legs behind are short and strong and curved. It walks upright like kangaroos do, but even in this position its arms are long enough to touch the ground.

Everything above the waist is shelled, the tail and lower legs flex freely and are bare. When swimming, they stow their long front limbs along their sides and, head down, use their tail and legs as flukes.

The head is like a baby's, large and round, with a high crown. Two huge blue fishlike eyes are placed on either side. The mouth is crablike, troubling to observe and utterly blue inside. If and when it bleeds its

blood is also blue. The construction of their smooth shelly domes of the head and the interlocking plates of their mouth makes it look, to human eyes at least, as if they smile.

The Navigating Crabs are loved by sailors and loathed by natural creatures of the deep.



Opinions on their origins are wide, but, typically, Leptoblast reports them all as verified fact:

"True, once they were other than they were now. True, by crime, mischance and dark heroic act they have offended that immortal power. True! Cursed they are, enchained in durance vile in this strange form! And true, yes also so, that they are exiled to the margins of their home, searching without end for some forgotten subterranean zone that once was theirs! Only to be found again at the end of days when the seas give up their secrets and ancient lands rise once more from the deep!"

The Navigating Crabs are predated heavily by natural creatures of the ocean and the attacks of these creatures grow in intensity and aggression the longer the Crabs stay in one place. After several months their position becomes untenable and the local ocean, now home to numerous sharks, octopi and various other dangerous oceanic predators, is now a hazardous zone. After the Redeemers leave, the ocean will slowly calm, the predators will disperse and relax, storms and tides abate.

The precarious life of the Navigating Crab has dulled their spirit not at all. They are often seen leaping and gambolling about on the cliffs, playing for no reason.

They take some significant pleasure in rescuing intelligent creatures from the sea. They will pull swimmers out of rip-tides, assist trapped climbers on ocean cliffs, they hurl themselves onto ships in storms just before they hit a rocky reef. Helmsmen know that when a crab lands on board it is time to steer aside. They have been known to bring food to shipwrecked sailors trapped on isolated isles. They have guided lifeboats home. Their location on rocky storm-swept shorelines puts them in an excellent position to do this kind of thing and because of it they are loved by sailors and communities that depend on the sea.

Omnivorous and clever predators, they will hunt small animals and men if they think they can get away with it. They will rescue people from the sea, but not in general. Anyone lost or trapped on land is as likely to be chased and eaten alive.

THE SHAMEFUL BEAST or WRETCH APES

The Shameful Beast is known and loathed. Most dangerous when not provoked. Drive them off with curses but aid them at your own risk. If they achieve anything at all, they may tear you apart in a rage.

The creatures look almost like people, with thick central trunks and long limbs, both thin and strong. Their teeth are huge, triangular and pointed like a sharks. At rest their snagged interlocking teeth are exposed in blunt letterbox mouths. The jaws don't work like human mouths. When they become excited or especially ashamed, their mouths form perfect circles ringed by pointed teeth, through which they hoot and moan, a disturbing an inhuman sight and sound.

The eyes are large and round, nose snubbed, they go naked but for splatterings of rough black fur.

They are roughly as intelligent as a man, and many think that if they wished to they could do everything that mankind does. The fact that they refuse this enrages a certain kind of person.

The Wretch Apes live low degraded lives out in the wilderness, without technology, tool use and the wit or will to even seek a cave in which to lair. In storms they simply curl up on the churning ground, hooting and moaning. When the storm has passed perhaps some Beasts have drowned or died of cold, the rest move on.

Their stocky bodies and difficult lives make them tougher than the average person.

Vile creatures of extraordinary and poetic awareness, they have been cursed with perfect self-knowledge. **They know exactly how horrid they are.** They choose to live in the most degrading and awful ways possible because any gesture towards bettering their lot would be a terrible and unforgivable pretence and hypocrisy. **They are awful and they know they are awful, that is all they can ever be.**

They have a keen sensitivity to the beauty of the natural world. Sometimes they will go en-masse to very beautiful places just to sit there and feel the deep discontinuity between the overwhelming harmony of nature and the basic horror of their lives and forms. Then, out of shame, they will foul the place. Then, seeing what they have done, they will feel even more shame. Those visiting out of the way beauty spots, or enjoying the grandeur of a silent woodland or abandoned temple, will often be disturbed by the howling and ruination of a pack of Shame Beasts.

The Shameful Beast is usually non-harmful towards most beings, but becomes dangerous in a few circumstances.

Firstly if treated with respect or kindness by, for instance, big city liberal do-gooders. In this case they will brutally assault the person in question. Unless the do-gooding is exceedingly and obviously hypocritical, a mask of sentimental compassion laid over a core of secret contempt. In this case the Wretch Ape will play along, acting in ever more shameful ways to bring out the false alarm of the self-appointed educator.

It is a given that if Shameful Beasts are seen sharing company with anyone, that person must loathe them as much as they loath themselves. This is obvious to everyone except the person in question.

Secondly, if the chance arises of a violent act that would show the Shameful Ones to be truly and unforgivably awful. (Assaulting a lone child crossing the moors with flowers for its mother, breaking into the house of an old widow and shitting in her bed, pushing over a bride at her wedding.) Then sometimes the Wretch Apes will attack simply because they feel they have to. They do not want to do these things. But they are terrible creatures and feel they have no choice.

Children are taught to drive off the Shame Beasts with simple but inventive curses.

"Die in a ditch you shit-of-the-womb!"

"Sky pukes, earth weeps, to see your face!"

"Scream for your sorrows you vomit of dog!"

The more shame the shame beasts feel, the less danger they present. At the height, or depth, of their shame, they will collapse to the ground writhing their filthy bodies and howling their terrible howls.

But, they have a strong survival instinct and living as they do in the darkest wilderness, it is difficult for them not to occasionally achieve something, whether something as simple as living through the winter, or bringing down a beast of prey. It is at these moments that the Wretch Apes are at their most dangerous, the cognitive dissonance within them causes them to act out in the most (shamefully) violent way.

People hate them.



SHRINE-OH

In the crook in the hills behind the town the temple is burnt down. The sacred pillars written with the names of saints are ash and the idols are cast into the dirt, what once was there is memory now and whatever peaceful god made that their home is lost and gone forever.

Never to return.

Only mist, and a cold billow of ash in a warm wind, and a dark serrated shape drifting through the blackened spars on heavy legs, traceless, weightless and soft. Its eye like a polished coal.

Born of fire and loss and a memory of peace, yet not quite gone. Not yet. Something still remains to cast up the grey ash and the cold air, up into a shape like cupped hands moulding clay, forgetting even as they shape what they do or why.

The creation of an absent mind, a curlicue on the earth, a thing of smoke and hidden thought. The air that drifts across its back pulls up flickering rags of mist like a grey flame burning on its spine. Its body thick and massed, distinct, impressed with power. Its feet tread slowly on the earth like those that bear weight should, but the soil resists all mark or print, holding itself traceless, smooth and flat.

If the final temple of a forgotten god is unjustly torched by evil hands, as its memory passes from the world, it can, as it departs, sculpt the air and the burnt flecks of its home and the dark smoke that makes its only creed into a living shape. A shape that moves. Not much more than a child's figure.

Something like a rhino, something like a dinosaur. Black and grey and made of smoke. Moving against the wind. Disappearing into shadow. Drifting stealthily. Evaporating now and then into pools of murk, then, once the seeking eye has past its view, combining once again.

The Shrine-Oh is motivated not by rage but by a hunger to protect. It is purpose embodied in smoke, and not much else.

Usually the Shrine-Oh will track whomever burnt its temple down, hoping to undo or frustrate their future harms.

The families run from burning homes, the burners biting at their heels. A shadow, gigantic, flows out of the dark, with a featureless animal face and a winking carbonised eye.

Suddenly, a sea of darkness tips above the sky and takes them in, they are wrapped in ash that does not choke, couture'd in black and grey. Given visions that they cannot understand. Emerging from the dark they find their hunters momentarily scared away, and themselves caked in a covering of smoky muck which makes miraculously good camouflage until they wash it off. Pursued now by a vision of fire they are unable to forget.

Those who pass through the Shrine-Oh's enfolding smoke are often changed. There in the darkness of the memory of a forgotten god, many things are seen:

A panther, anthracite black or eyes of flame, related to no living thing, faceless matchheads, beckoning old mistakes. A copse with trunks of ash and leaves burning like the light from a dispossessed moon, a moon falling through its own reflected light to harrow its companion world. A peaceful Oxen, belly full as the yellow curve of a fat candle flame, motionless in a draughtless room.

Hooded figures in the billows, each holding wreaths of smoke-bouquets clasped in spiralling hands, they bow and look long upon encrypted trains of secret thought. An armoured man, the steel that wraps him is the gleam a fire makes whitely on its own smoke and the eyes in the red mask of his face are a brief blue like pops of unexpected gas and he knows why you are there and can name the things that bought you so though you could not.

A ship upon a sea of fire with sails of lighter flame, mast bent in heavy press, running before the cold coal-black storm that feeds around the tongues and perimeters the fire in fjords of dark. A plain of fire, flattened as if on a driving wind, yet endless, wide, expanding from

no source, its sky composed of floods of blackbodied soot pregnant with carried heat, emission-dark, but lit by a river of stars, uneternal sparks, dying as they flurry constellations wild against the carbon sky.

And those who see these things do not forget, the dream stays with them and some claim strange changes and new ambitions. Some say they read the smoke from burning things, a tress opinion from its burning leaf, or the treasured knowledge of a book from the flag-like pennants of its soot, that they hear the music of flame and understand the inner selves of burning things by listening to them die by fire.

Some, smoke will not touch or raise above, it bows around them, never rising above hip height, moving higher only as they pass. Some form a strange white wood from ash, persuading it with words. Others change in other ways, less visible, but of strange power. They are infected with the memory of places they have never seen and which they must seek out, or with knowledge of old crimes, or laden with strange debts to impossible beings to be discharged.

The Shrine-Oh can hold itself together for some time, tracing its creators, hiding from the wind in ditches, moving through the forest like a living labyrinth of smoke, patiently waiting for its act.

SMILING BIRD

This fat, waddling, stupid-looking bird hunts the teeth of people and puts them in its mouth to find a mate.

"How I hate the Smiling Bird, it has something ancient in its form. At times it seems to me more like a lizard than a bird. They are flightless, turkey-sized, thick-set and strong, verging on plump. Their thick short feathers in dull greys and greens. Stealthy Devils! These feathers make effective camouflage, if it hides its smile and stays still it is very difficult to see. The wings are stubs and waggle stupidly to help it balance as it walks. Its tail is rich and fat, delicious. Though, the pleasure derived from consumption of the Smiling Bird is less to do with taste and more of sweet poetic vengeance as you drive your still-attached teeth into their flesh. The tail moves like a lizards, not a birds stiff feathers. Beware its claws, for they are stronger than they seem and can strike a nasty blow. But, filthy cowards that they are, the Smiling Birds hate combat, they tend to topple over when they fight. The head is disturbing, with a low slanted eye, liquid and warm, almost human. Its beak is remarkable, with unique nodular serrations for it to fit the teeth.

If you see one, kill it." - Leptoblast

The Smiling Birds are scavengers and thieves, famous for scratching at graves in the night. In some areas corpses are buried with iron braces or headbaskets to stop the teeth being taken by the tunnelling bird. Some dig their warren-homes near the lairs of deadly creatures, monsters that prey on man, or bandits. These groups and creatures allow the Smiling Bird to live nearby--like them, it wants people to die, and all it asks for in return is teeth. Smiling Birds may keep watch from their concealed holes, allowing intruders to creep close. When they have come far enough to make retreat a challenge, the Smiling Bird gives the alarm, it follows as they try to creep silently about, issuing squawks and making their position clear, running away on its fat legs if they try to stop it, then later coming back.

Like a Parrot, Smiling Birds can stupidly mimic human speech, or natural sounds. They will try luring travellers into steep defiles, deep fogs or swamps or frighten them into running off a cliff in the night. Starving, falling, eaten, trapped, or lost: so long as someone dies the Smiling Birds don't care.

When you are helpless, then, the birds approach, sometimes fighting for precedence amongst themselves. The one with the fullest smile is always first. They clamber onto you and reach inside your mouth with their strong claws. One by one, starting with the best, they wrench out your teeth, the bird dexterously tries each tooth in its own mouth, aiming for a specific fit, throwing the rest away.

The Bird with the best smile will lead the flock, and be certain to find a mate, so competition for teeth is fierce.

Not everyone this happens to is dead; the victim can still be alive. Which explains the usual call of the Smiling Bird, the call they make most of all, when following and waiting, approaching and fighting amongst themselves, or simply watching as you die.

It is a call in a human voice. It comes from the throats of a dozen birds in a discordant shout.

It says "MY TEEFF!"

And again and again like the callings of birds, "MY TEEFF, MY TEEFF, MY TEEFF!"

SNAPKEG

Priests and ranting madmen have named the Snapkeg living portal to the afterlife, which it certainly will be if you get too close to it. Sometimes they puke up saints.

As a mode of self-defence it's hard to beat.

They hang in the water like smooth sleeping stones, the arcs or their razor sharp beaks piercing the reflection of the sky. A huge round bluegreen body with three short legs per side. "Like a gigantic dachshund, violent and obese", claims Leptoblast. Its flat tail drifts behind it, slack. A pumice-rough and mobile tongue protrudes through the blade of its mouth, trailing in the water like a mat. A river-dwelling, hippo-sized omnivorous thing feared, respected and scrupulously avoided by all.

Its jaws are strong, its beak is sharp. If anything awakes it by mischance the Snapkeg will rapidly retract its tongue and bite violently at whatever it is. Often other Snapkegs. This can lead to bloody fights and dominance displays displacing enough water to drown a small boy.

At night they wake and wander, feasting on watery weeds. Or anything they want. Crops, fences, doors, dogs, trees, boats, goats left tied up or people drunk and wandering in the night. Snapkegs do not like chasing things, and plants tend not to run away, so most of its flesh-eating is by chance or in response to threat.

Their slowness and general indifference to man means they are ignored too long. If a Snapkeg herd drifts through the rivers and the warm swamps, gradually migrating closer to a town, it's easy to avoid. Most travellers can simply go around. But, should they come by midnight to the centre of the town, and settle down, there is not much people can do. Everyone is terrified of the Snapkeg and they should be, because they will bite your legs off if you get close and it takes a small army to stop a herd of them once they become riled up. Added to this difficulty, pilgrims may arrive, waiting for the Snapkegs to throw up.

They possess a special duct.

The Snapkeg cannot pass iron. Metal of any kind can be poisonous to it, it does not traverse the Snapkegs tract and the Snapkeg, as is well remarked, can disgorge but once in every hundred years, and only in response to Mighty Fear. Since its indiscriminate feeding leads it inevitably to snap up scraps of iron and gold (a ring on a finger, a blade in a hand), it diverts them internally.

Anything containing metal is coated with a remarkable slime and stored within a tertiary stomach where it stays.

Maybe in perpetuity, no upper limit to the Snapkegs age has yet been found. Legend says they live as long as the river in which they swim. Snapkegs that have snapped a lot of stuff, or simply those too fearless to easily throw up, rumble slightly as they walk, the slime-stored tools and knobs inside them grate and churn. But the slime of the Snapkegs gland preserves not only metal, but flesh, and keeps it in a delayed state. If a living being is somehow swallowed whole, it can, perhaps survive, adjourned from nature's flow, for an unmeasured period of time.

Sometimes they puke whole ancient men swallowed long before, with swords of iron. Sometimes these men are still alive. Some faiths think there is a timeless world inside the beast. A world like ours, but frozen, still, and quiet, where life can wait, preparing for its urge. The Snapkeg plays a major part in the myths of life, and after-life, for several nations and faiths.

Several ancient story-cycles start with the heroes regurgitation, or end with their swallowing, perhaps to be re-born. The common folk believe that anyone thrown up by a Snapkeg who still lives, has a deep destiny to fulfil. Though mainly what they vomit up are human hands and nails from boats.

Only a true King can ride a Snapkegs back, or so they say. There is certainly a fashion for being painted so. The corridors of Jukai Turret Prime are lined with oils in which past Chancellors ride the backs of snapping beasts. (None of them actually rode a Snapkeg, most never saw a Snapkeg, the meaning is symbolic, showing the Sovereign mastering the cycles of time and re-birth.) But still-active is the law which makes successfully riding the beast one of the Seven Theoretical Conditions in which the constitution may be changed Without Reprove.

Others say the rumbling and clashing jaws of the Snapkeg warn of danger. They do, they warn of the danger of a Snapkeg.

The skin is highly resistant to harm and the curing of its hide a process known to only one surviving man. But clothes and armour made this way provide exceptional protection against the slashing and stabbing of blades.

It's jaws can be carefully honed into a pair of Scimitars-Of-Bone, incredibly sharp. The Bog-Elves and swamp-drunk nomads of the Melanic Moors exploit the Snapkeg's storied rep by using these bone weapons on their raids, they are said to be 'one with the swamp'.

In fact the Bog Elves and swamp drunks are as terrified of the Snapkeg as everyone else. The swords are mainly metal painted white. Even the real versions are often recovered from bodies killed by some natural event.

SPECTRE-WEB BEETLE

A large and thoughtful creature of the insect kind, which feeds men to its young.

The beetle is about three feet high, coloured in carapace-black and spats of hoary gridelin. The legs are slender and project directly down from its thick and bulbous body making it look like a rather radical coffee table when it is standing still. Its frontal features are disturbing and complex, consisting of a tightly-nested and symmetrical series of plates, some moveable, some not, a series of jaws like a watchmakers fever-dream and a pair of unusual insect eyes. The vertical arrangement of its legs, opposed to customary insect-form, only increases the sense that it waits, not simply present, paused in scuttling, or frozen in mid-movement, but calmly and quietly aware. Intelligence, awareness and alien malignancy imbue themselves into the mind whenever it is seen.

The Spectre-Web is skilled in sound. It counterfeits them: storms and the creaking of doors, the fall of metronomic drops, steps on rotten wood, anything it hears it can repeat. And words, but not the meaning that they hold. Scream "help me!" and you will hear it echoed back. It knows this signals danger. But repeat the same word calmly at another time, 'Help me', and it will not connect the meaning to the sound.

As well as mimicry, the Spectre-web can make a counter-tone. This strange opposing noise can veil and mute one single other type of sound. A shout, a scream, a speaking voice.

It's most mysterious skill is the buzzing projection of panic and fear. A dull dense barely-perceptible throbbing in the air that pricks up the skin and ripples water in the glass. Dogs bark angrily in response, people become troubled and afraid certain they are observed by something that they cannot see. A presence, living, just beyond the corner or the door, something in the walls or in the room behind you now.

Unlike many insects, Spectre-Webs watch over and preserve their young. These number in the hundreds. They are energetic silk-producing grubs that eat fresh meat and make a colony shaped like a ghost.

Young grubs first form a colony in something like a webbish shape, this web is unlike others: it can move. Each grub can eject its tiny strand of silk at high speed and reel it back in. They can also cause the adhesive end of their silk to loose its hold at will. This means a single grub can move about by 'firing' its silk-knot ahead of it, letting it stick to something, reeling it in, releasing it and then repeating the process.

The Spectre-Web waits by her young, singing to them in tones so high and wild they cause nearby bats to go suicidally mad. The grubs are singly unintelligent, her song shapes their actions for them. Under her direction, they form a structural web, about the size of a doorway. With the continual attachment and reeling of hundreds of tiny strands of silk this web can move about. It is not fast, about the speed of an old man tottering, but in an emergency it can be retracted to a single point very quickly and stowed in a very small space.

Since all its children love to eat is human flesh the Spectre-Web prefers a densely populated place. It is visibly horrific though and needs somewhere that it can safely hide. The most likely location is a dark and mazelike, near people, but desolate itself.

The Spectre-Web lures food with whatever noise it can. Anything that draws people towards its lair. Not too many, single people or small groups are best. Children are excellent. The aim is to bring the prey into closed space where the larvae-web can block them off and fall upon them, devouring them utterly. The baby bugs will clean a human being down to the bare bones in a couple of hours. It mutes the screams.

"Why do the webs have faces and why do they seem to have hands? A slow adaptation perhaps, to hunting human beings. Any potential victim who escapes and speaks of being hunted by a pale human figure, cloaked in fear, is less likely to be listened to, less likely to deliberately return and if they do come back, their tactics will be much less effective than they would otherwise be.

Certainly most people encountering a Spectre-Web believe they are in contact with a ghost. I imagine their relief on finding themselves wrapped in nothing more mysterious than a web is short-lived when they discover the web is full of thousands of flesh eating grubs, that their screams produce no noise. And that a beetle calmly watches from across the room." - Zenithal

STAR GROOLS

The Grools themselves are black, like the centre of a pencil, and made of the same stuff. They live in miniature suns. The suns have cores of blue with red coronal rays, an adult man could just about grasp them in spread arms.

The Grools live curled up inside as the suns float tamely like a child's balloon. The blue stars of the Grools do not burn as hot as our own Sun, or even as hotly as fire. They scorch like cinders or ash just scraped out of the grate, making it very difficult for anything to penetrate the star and drag out the Groot.

In the day the Grools direct their stars high up into the sky, they cluster around the Sun as it moves across the heavens, the pale light of the Groot stars is invisible next to that of the sun, or mistaken for a poor fortune, some minor planet out of place. This hides them from observers on the ground. On cloudless nights, camouflaged against the starlit sky, they hunt. Anyone could see them and no-one thinks to look or dare suspect that a constellation tracks them through the night. The Grools are only a few hundred feet above your head. Looking down, waiting for a moment to strike.

For unobservant prey the Grools will simply wait until they sleep or stand distracted on open ground. Then spiral-swoop down, surrounding their target with a spinning circle of suns.

They have noticed though that some prey creatures will willingly seek them out and even separate themselves from their fellows, wandering off into isolated areas at night, staring up onto the sky, following the beckoning Groot. Some Grools have learnt to form signs and strange constellations in order to lure idiots, prophets and philosophers out into the empty wild. They bring them to a distant peak or isolated hill then they slowly slowly sink towards the earth. Closer and closer until the amazed viewer finds themselves surrounded by a group of orbs rimmed by slow petals of red fire licking out in every direction. Closer still, until they orbit around the prey. Nearly burning.

Then, as one, they leap out and attack.

The Grools themselves are child-sized black frog-ape things with round faceted black eyes and long frog fingers. They are no stronger than men and will try to pull their target down, biting them with their small black teeth and strangling with their black froglike hands. If they are successful, each will quickly drag back part of the prey to feast on sun-cooked meat inside their private star.

"Some secret essence of the Grools keeps them in strange equilibrium with the substance of their sun. If the Groot is gone too long its fiery cyst begins to fluctuate, fluttering like candleflame, palpitating like a bag blown in and out. What happens next can vary a great deal.

Most Groot-Stars cool to a pineapple sized chunk of white flame then drift gently to the ground. They leave a core of iron about the size of a clenched hand, an iron of extraordinary density and strength. Star-Iron is highly valued and both blades and armour made from it are said to dull magical effects.

Other stars without their nesting Grools can quickly grow, they produce a flaming orb the size of a small house. This fire is relatively cool and can be survived, though it may light clothes and scorch flesh.

A very small number of Groot-Stars explode like fireballs with staggering speed. So rare is this that I have only confirmed the phenomena by observing its remains: a strange multi-coloured 'fog' which persists in place, glowing slightly in the night and dispersing slowly over half a year.

There are tales and rumours of a fourth and final Groot-Star state: a black pinprick hanging in the air, whistling madly as a vortex forms around it. Workers of the Subtle Art seek out these strange black spots and must do so with some success for I have never seen one in the wild."

- Leptoblast

Grools have minds and aims and can be allied with. Tales tell of madmen on the tops of towers who take council from the stars themselves, and hence know all things, and of ruthless desert tribes who hunt by night staring at the sky, but whom not prey escapes.



STEGALOSWAN

Long and light-footed, it trips through the glades, sought by schemers, dreamers, poets and the mad. Few can claim to have seen, to have gazed on in rapture, the subtle and peaceful Stegaloswan.

All are absorbed by its beauty.

The base arrangement of its form is very like a terror-beast or mega-thing of ancient times, quadrupedal, huge, the mass of multiple horses, with bony plates pointing up directly from its spine.

These run down the top of its long swanlike neck, gradually becoming smaller, ending just above its small, calm face. An evenly-sized tail at its other extremity gives the Stegaloswan what Leptoblast called "a wavelike symmetry, most pleasing to behold".

The colours of the Stegaloswan are much remarked, it is pigmented like the hummingbird in iridescent shades. The fine scales of its body shine in cinnabar, citrine, cerulean and smalt. Often with the centre scale being a deep yellow or red, fading towards the cerulean rim and the deep blue smalt joins of between the scales. The scales arranged in alternating patterns, strange yet harmonious.

The protective plates of the Stegaloswan are, even more vibrant. They ripple like shining mother-of-pearl. Not white but hyacinthine, ianthane, modea and Or, the colour of heraldic gold. So luminous and perfectly-arranged are the shining colours of the Stegaloswan that those who see them directly for the first time are momentarily paralysed with sensuous rapture.

Also like the hummingbird, the Stegaloswan feeds precisely from the orchids and the brightest flowers and, in fact, will never crush a flower. Far from a brute and the blundering beast, its daintiness and fineness are renowned. It moves delicately through its forest home. So light is its careful tread that it even leaves no track upon the ground, the steps of an ant in the sand leave deeper marks than the passing of the Stegaloswan.

As light-footed, secretive, shy and aware as the Stegaloswan is, few who seek it out will ever catch sight of one. Sightings are so rare that they are ritualised in many nations with those lucky enough to have seen the Stegaloswan directly often singled out for unexpected fates. Multiple religions claim that to touch one is to change your fate, and that should someone be cursed, or damned to a particular sorrowful end, then stroking the Stegaloswan once, will loose the chains of time and let them seize their own result from life.

Aptly is it said that when the Stegaloswan is stroked, death blinks and a new story begins.

Some claim that the creature itself is a myth or a hoax. Leptoblast bagged a sighting in Aun, Zenithal confirmed multiple encounters through interviewing witnesses and states:

"the concurrence of detail in both appearance, habit and visual effect across multiple individuals of varying cultures and languages, many of whom are too simple to have even heard of the Stegaloswan before encountering it, leads me to believe the creature is real. As to its mythical power to un-knot fate, I am not sure what evidence would prove or disprove the claim. But every individual who met the beast first hand was certain that it could, and those who failed to stroke it wept on speaking with the sorrow of their loss."

Ashkott has only examined parts of the creature, illegally obtained, and has so far refrained from any judgement on the issue.

Those who deliberately seek the Stegaloswan report the creature as shy and elusive when pursued but witnesses lucky enough to simply blunder into seeing one all remark on its exceptional friendliness. Leptoblast himself was in Aun hunting Curseling rumours and woke one day to find himself face-to-face with an unexpected visitor:

"I opened my eyes and found, directly before my face, another. This one: strange, narrow, brightly-hued, lizardlike and unmistakably friendly. It seemed to hover in the air. Only its extraordinarily playful and bashful expression prevented me from reaching immediately for the weapon I keep always by my side whenever I sleep. Well that I did for as I looked down I saw the face was on the end of a long and brightly armoured neck which was poking in through the entry to my tent.

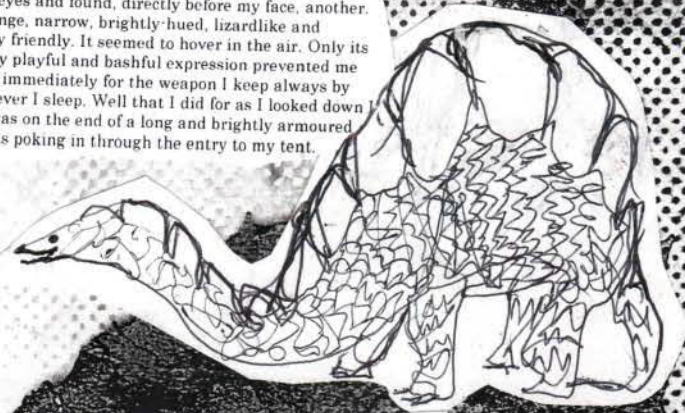
Baffled, not knowing what to do, I simply said 'Good Morning'. The face slowly receded and I felt a strange sense of loss. I hung for a moment, thoughtless in the still early-morning air inside the brightly lit walls of the tent then, recovering my wits, I leapt up and threw myself outside.

It was still there, the brightest and most wonderful creature I have ever seen, like a rainbow caught within a swelling wave of clear water. Its calm face turned to me once more, then it walked swiftly and utterly silently away into the enfolding green.

I was stunned for several seconds, by the time I recovered my wits and summoned my colleagues it was gone. There were no tracks, none at all."

The plates and scales of the Stegaloswan are incredibly valuable and incredibly illegal in all markets. Dealing in them, or being known to hunt the Stegaloswan is regarded as a loathly and vile pursuit. But very well paid.

Various powerful, and perhaps evil creatures and people have been said to pay enormous sums simply for access to a live Stegaloswan, seeking to evade a fate vilely earned. If they have been successful, none have spoken of it.



STRANGELS

Strangels come from somewhere far above the surface of the world and touch the earth only in remote but wonderful zones far from the eye of man. They stay for a single moonlit night, eating the night-blooming rose, and licking its petalled dew. Then, before dawn, they are gone.

Plump insectile-centaurs, about three feet high, with the heads and faces of children or small, beautiful androgynous girls. They have two dexterous humanoid arms and a beetle-like rear running parallel to the ground. Hairless, yet when content they are crowned by a halo of wild silver fire. This fire is the fire of their beautiful thoughts. The skin of the Strangel is snow and maggot-white, tactile and attractive.

Few see the Strangel-skin without imagining its touch, like fine silk pillows or fresh ice cream it cries out to be tasted and caressed, stroked and felt.

Strangels tolerate this only if the person stroking them is also very soft, and a little bit fat like a maggot would be. They love extremely plump people with warm soft skin and, if approached carefully, will crawl all over them cooing and nestling, like a cat circles and sits upon a well-loved couch.

They walk on moonlight and this is how the Strangels reach the ground from their celestial home, by riding the light of the moon. But they are not without assurances of their own. (Who would fully trust the Moon?)

To focus the light of their rapturous thoughts and cut open the throats of their foes, the Strangels wear curves of pearly white bone, like crescent moons, through which they poke their heads. The beautiful silver dreams of the Strangels burn like white phosphorous, they can melt through bone in the time it takes to scream. The Strangels collar-moon lets it project these thoughts and bring them to a point, like the tip of a burning torch held by spectral hands before the face. Since the silver thoughts are like the light of the moon, Strangels can hold them like a rippling river of light beneath their feet, and race into the sky, even when the moon is gone. Finally, its edges are exceedingly sharp and can be used as a weapon in emergencies or situations of unlikely guile.

If Strangels are forced to defend themselves they will often do so with their eyes closed, and by using annihilating conjunctions of silver fire that removes all evidence of its own use. As a last resort a Strangel may offer itself to its captors for a single kiss.

Few can resist the aching softness of its lips. If the person kissed is beautiful (to them), the silver Strangel-thoughts will incandesce and the Strangel will make its escape from beneath a veil of silver fire. Should an ugly one lean in, the Strangel twists its neck to cut their throat with its collar-moon, then, with its eyes closed, runs away to scamper through the air on a path of its own silver light, thinking beautiful thoughts.

Strangels can only incandesce their own ideas if they are very beautiful, noble and good. So deep and sensitive are they, that this is usually not too hard, but, it does mean that should the moon be absent from the sky, they can only migrate home by a continuous and deep dwelling upon the most wonderful ideas.

As well as this, they must have their crescent blade of bone to focus thoughts into a silver path on which to walk the air. If this blade is stolen, broken, lost or taken away, or if they can no longer dream of beautiful things, the Strangel may be trapped on earth. At least until the next bright moon.

This is part of why they only come at night, so they cannot see too much of the horror of the world. Their silver light bathes everything in softness, and the dark around the Strangels glows like the darkness in a pleasant dream.

If a Strangel does become trapped, this can be very bad. All are deeply attracted and drawn to adore the pleasing whiteness of the Strangels, and powerful and avaricious souls hunger to control and possess the Strangel flesh. They are worth staggering amounts as pets, or slaves. Many wealthy people keep a caged or collared Strangel, too depressed and ruined by the world to fire its thoughts, they stroke and obscenely caress, collar it in gold and give to it a name that's not its own. A dangerous pet indeed. For though a Strangel can be kept prisoner by despair, beauty can release its silver fire.

Strangels are rumoured to both prey and to be preyed on by Star-Grools in the upper world between the stars and us.

STUMBLEWEED

A copse of green-black trees, leaves bare and fruitless, cradling bones and bodies in the sharp spikes of their moaning pipes.

Stumbleweed have slim black trunks about fifteen feet high. Beyond that spray the leafpipes: thick, stiff, green-black tubular leaves radiating outwards from a central core. The leafpipes are long and strong, sometimes crooking slightly, their edges curved like organ mouths, sharper than knives.

The legs of Stumbleweed at rest are bound together in the ground, still and seeming deeply-rooted in the earth, so someone unfamiliar with the weed will be surprised when it begins to move.

"They are simply pneumatic trees. Wind drifting across the plains is picked up by the pipes of the plant. (This is the source of the Stumbleweeds' music, mere air across a vibrating pipe.) The tree diverts the pressure of this air, moving over multiple mouths, to work its baky limbs. At first the rootlegs crack as joints accept new impulse from the diverted boreal flux. If the wind increases, the 'legs' separate and take tiny shuffling steps. The plants shuffle slowly at first, but should the winds break out in gale or storm, they will begin to run, tacking back and forth in long arcs against the direction of the wind." - Zenithal

Stumbleweed can't see so when it moves, it stumbles and often falls. Not a problem for the tree as it is very tough and simply staggers to its feet and carries on, but amazingly dangerous for anyone around. The leafpipes of the stumbleweed are sharp, should a tree impact your flesh you will be riddled with leaves and utterly run through. If the tree then raises up and starts to run again, you will remain. Trapped. Screaming. Bleeding to death and disappearing from view as the Stumbleweed races off into the oncoming storm.

"It was upon the Pyrrhous Plains. At the time I knew little of them but dark uncertain rumour. Seeing only a forest of green-black trees with knobbly trunks, I ignored the advice of my guide and decided to investigate for myself. A choice I was soon to regret.

As I entered into the shadow of the softly moaning trees, the breeze picked up. The sound, at first gentle, hummed from every pipe, it seemed as if the air itself was seeping sound, an otherworldly choir echoing from some alien inaccessible zone both near and far. Then, as the breeze deepened, the black limbs cracked into life! The walk of the woods began!

The choir became a deafening torrent of black organic noise, the trees begin to step! At first slowly then in steady repetitions. The woods became a shuffling crowd, like the markets of a city, jostling and tightly packed. Beginning in semi-random motions, the trees upon the forests leading edge, closest to the wind, moved first. I ran, heading as much as I could across the direction of the trees. I was knocked and battered by the black limbs but thankfully retained my feet as I fled madly through that moving labyrinth of living death, each crowned with spikes! Only now did I fully perceive the bones and dried out bodies of cattle, sheep and even men, adorning the tops of these murderous plants like necromantic crowns! As gaps opened up amongst the plants, some jogged aimlessly. Then, a spume of surging air! The trees began to run. A few moved in either direction across the motion of the wind, but soon, by whatever dark communal mind they have, a single course was made, and, by sheer chance, this brought me to the forests quickly disappearing edge. I dashed downwind, clutching my ears to somehow ward away the screaming torrent of sound from the forest as it ran away into the rising gale. I turned once, to see the trees begin to crown some distant ridge, skylined against the storm-wracked sky, the land itself was flowing like a tidal sea. Neither of my guides was ever seen again." - Leptoblast

"There is no proof at all that the Stumbleweed possess a communal mind based upon the exchange of pollen or spores, that the strength or intellect of this mind increases as the wind rises or that Stumbleweed deliberately hunt animals and men, using the nutrients of their decaying corpses as a kind of moveable store. I will state this as simply as I can: THERE IS NO PROOF OF PREDATORY TREES." - Ashkott

Stumbleweed pipes are eagerly sought, renowned for their rumoured musical and magical properties, and very difficult to retrieve. Stumbleweed are also hard to cut down. The wood is tough knotted, harmful to the axe. It is very difficult to predict where they are going to be at any time. Burning them can create a much more aggressive problem, as the city of Kal-Shush notably discovered when they tried to eradicate a Stumbleweed forest that had moved dangerously close to their walls. The resulting pack of burning, racing, spiked trees resulted in significant loss of life.

SUNSET STORK

The Sunset Stork is a creature shaped to live within the aurulent palaces and luteous forests of golden fire which make up the surface of that distant sphere.

There, on the surface of the sun, testaceous feathers camouflage their shape against the blazing trees. Storks dip their beaks into rivers of burning light to snatch up the shattered-diamond fishes of the sun. Sometimes, desiring change of scenery or diet, they ride the sun's red rays down to the surface of the world. There they stand swathed in ash on the volcanoes edge, or cloaked in boiling steam where the lava-rivers meet the sea, picking their way, knee high in fire, eyes locked on the earths oozing molten blood. There they fish for the secret obsidian fish of the deep earth which they swallow whole, and sometimes for those aberrant snacks thrown up from the dark entrenchments of the sea.

Scattered rumours say they ate a Geyser Lord when one popped up. Difficult to treat as true, but certainly no Geyser Lord has yet been seen when the Sunset Stork stalks forth.

"Stratospheric godlike Storks have been claimed to be observed. These are delusional dreams. They are only as high as a house. Or perhaps a graffle, no more. The environmental conditions on the surface of the sun and the unsteady nature of its red rays make it impossible for any creature larger than this to ride them effectively and well. They would fall from the sky. And, in fact, do. This being the true source of so-called 'meteors'." - Ashkott

Like all the creatures of the sun, the Sunset Stork cannot survive the night. To it, even the mildness of the moon and the soft light of the stars is an oceanic bath of utter dark. If it is caught on earth after the final rays of light have left the sky it will blacken and burn mazarine, horribly reduced to ash and to a small iron heart.

Since they can only ride the red rays of sunset once it starts, and as they must ride them back before the sun is gone, their window of survival in the mortal realm is short. The Stork is constantly aware of time and will not be delayed.

"I contracted, at some expense, a worker of the Subtle Art to help preserve my body in the burning fields where I must climb. This done, I timed my ascent to match the slow fall of the sun, hoping to reach the caldera just as it was touched by the sun's red rays.

I found the Stork herself polite, refined and not indifferent to my words, though rather pressed for time. She seemed impressed with my willingness to brave the wild and fiery pit in which she fished (flinging up droplets of iron as she snatched something out of the deep). I explained my purpose and related my not-undistinguished bonafides. The lady seemed more amused than impressed, though did say she would answer whatever I asked. There was no price to her council it seemed, except my good behaviour and willingness to seek her out. (As well as the ability to survive doing so.)

I asked if it was true that her kind 'know everything the sun can see'. She said to some degree it was. I found her wise and well ensconced in the polity of the sun (information for which I have since found no practical use at all). She did know much (though not all) of what the sun can see. But hers was the wisdom of fire, giving little thought to slowness, preservation or time, but only transformation and destruction, immediacy and change. She had rather radical opinions. In her words 'The sooner one thing becomes another the better. Why wait? Do and do now.' Those who wish to preserve and sustain will find little to enlighten them here. And, of course, she knew nothing at all of anything that occurred at night or in the dark, that side of our existence was a strange mystery to her.

I did ask her how long her journey home would take. She said 'Roughly eight minutes, to you observing. In flight of course it takes no time at all.' Which I did not understand.

I found her words frustrating and our time too short." - Leptoblast

Not all who approach the Sunset Stork do so to seek its wisdom, some want its feathers and its beak. If it can be defeated and plucked before night falls then any feathers taken will not burn. They will provide a fearsome protection against flame if formed into a cloak.

The beak of the Sunset Stork is famed for its sharpness and its legendary power. It can pierce any evil. A full beak can be converted into a pair of weapons, one made from the upper beak, one from the lower. The blades made are usually large, halberds, broadswords or some other hefty cleaver-like thing.

But those who do hunt and kill a Sunset Stork must fear the vengeance of the sun. If the sun's light touches even the smallest part of the dead body of a murdered Stork, then it will stop for a full minute in the sky to consider what it sees. Any involved in the murder will, from that point, face the 'Curse Of The Sun'.

The curse takes many different forms. Some suffer cancers wherever the sun has touched, thick mole-like growths knotting and gnarling the flesh. Some feel its light as burning pain, as if the sun were needles passing through the skin. For some the sunlight will refuse to meet their eyes. To them the world is endless night.

For a few offenders, the Sun sends out warrant to its thanes. Nothing that lives or grows by the light of the sun, or which lives on that which lives on light, may surrender any sustenance at all to one so cursed. The result is a terrible starvation. No plant or meat or product of anything that lives by the allowance of the sun will feed them. They may gulp it down but shall starve none the less. Only a few dark-growing mushrooms, or the lichen in caves will sustain them now. Some seek out the Trench Heralds or Geyser Lords to beg alms of the dark, some food grown deep below that owes nothing to the sun. But the price for this is high.

So the sun-cursed set forth, sometimes moving only in the night, swaddled in thick cloth or with their path lit by a lantern even though the day is bright, seeking out some act or penance that may salve the wrathful judgement of the light.



THUG BUGS

Thug Bugs get bigger when they ride a bigger beast. And they like to aim high.

They range in reds, from clotted scab to bright haematic bleed and are composed primarily of shell. A tough cartilaginous carapace that grows as they do. Limbs poke out like those of crabs or spiders huge, more versatile than both, adjustable, multi-directional, dexterous and each with opposable three-fingered claws that work much like a hand.

Its eyes hide in two dark and recessed slits, angled in a scowl that cannot change. Though, if bugs did have faces that could give their mood, they would scowl too. They are angry-happy almost all the time, pissed off, raw and gleeful to be so.

The bugs take animals like pirates taking ships, sometimes by stealth, sometimes by raw assault. (And once or twice by siege.) Once boarded, they rig the beast with bridle, hooks and goads and use these to ride it around. All Bugs seek to do this. The larger animal commanded, the greater status bugs possess. Ferocity also counts, but size, raw unforgivable mass, is the crown of the experience. It takes a quixotic bug indeed to trade down from cow to Wolverine. Bugs will leave their steed and home only if they can board and take a bigger beast, but if the possibility exists, they will not falter. Thug Bugs are exceptionally brave; they eat risk and shit death.

As bugs grow in size they conquer larger things (or possibly the other way around). They start about the size of a big tarantula and will try to take over a goat, then move on up from there. They are aquatic and can breathe equally well under water and on land. The bugs that hijack and ride whales can be about the mass of a small man.

(They do often attack ships from the backs of whales but this is usually an overconfident mistake on their part as, the ship not being an animal, it gains them no status and they find it complex and difficult to understand, sometimes simply riding the sailors instead.)

Hexapedal bugs make up the norm, but oddly limbed arrangements can be found. It's rare to see a bug with more than eight. A bug with only three can move around, but is considered crippled by the group. Tripodism carries a dark glamour in Thug Bug culture. In the same way that for us, the one-eyed are considered rogues or the blind thought to have gifts of sound. A clever tripod bug may be exulted by the group and thought even more cunning than they actually are, as every Thug Bug knows "Three Legs - Thinks Ahead". Platoons are often lead by tripod bugs. Bipeds are quickly eaten by the rest since they are no longer considered "real people". The position of a Tripod Bug in Thug Bug culture is precarious and ensures that yes, they do in fact, 'think ahead'.

Bug legends speak of gargantuan and ancient beasts slumbering beneath the earth, all bugs dream of finding one and riding it around as kings, it is the ultimate ideal of their culture. Bug heaven is just a beast as big as the world.

It's not hard to spot an animal captured by the bugs, they will board a bear and put flags on it, ride it around shouting and looking for trouble. They love violence and brawling for its own sake. On the ground, without a prize, they are quite cunning and stealthy but the bigger the ride they manage to control the more confident, loud and boisterous they become. (And the more disastrously deranged and hubristic their plans).

Though not evil, Thug Bugs love to fight more than they like to live. They seek to battle anyone they hate, or anyone they like a lot, if ambivalent they will battle you to find out what kind of person you are.

"Neither Arachnid or Crustaceans, they carry qualities of both. To be a living ancestor to both such ancient lines seems unlikely, though, the scoundrels do possess a squirming vital survival-urge. More interesting to note: before about five thousand years ago the red carapaced bugs are shown in ancient records as having no more self-awareness than a dog. They are depicted in hieroglyphs and stele as simple animalistic opportunistic group predators jumping out of holes. When I queried briefly captive bugs as to how and when they gained their wits they would answer only that they 'stole it' and would say no more."
- Leptoblast

Whatever their origins, the Thug Bugs now clearly possess both speech and use of tools. They can steal and craft weapons, tie knots and understand machines. They use this gift to pursue the only treasure they love: hijacked megafauna are their aim, the bigger and badder the better they is.

Thug Bugs don't know or care what gender is and are pretty sure they don't have one, which makes breeding difficult for them. One day a Thug Bug will suddenly realise it is female and, startled, run off to squat out secret eggs, then shamefully come back. Another realises it is male and sneakily follows, creeping to the eggs and ejaculating all over them before running back to where it was before and pretending nothing happened. If either of the bugs catches the other doing any of these things, they will all deny everything and come up with crazy excuses for their actions.

Once done they will never speak of it again.

TRENCH HERALD

The Herald has the spine and skull of a man, or something like a man. It adopted these for your convenience. It is an Ambassador.

Heralds are about seven feet long, or high, and swim-drift in mid-air as if moving slowly through a glutinous sea. Don't come too close, the atmosphere around them becomes thick, unbreathable and dank. Two long flagellum reach out of this murk and act as waving hands. Down each side a handful of lesser flagella beat slowly in the liquid air. Its eyes are shocks of colour, living coral fills the skull and bursts out through the ocular gaps. The lower jaw, and sometimes the upper too, have been replaced with needle-trap mouths of some infinitely patient deep-sea fish. The body is translucent pearl, the human spine leads visibly down into a nest of organs gathered round its base. Strange movements can be seen, and the suggestion of a circulatory flow perceived.

Heralds make their Embassies in locations with familiar feel. Great declivities with mounting darkness and brief cradling lights. Half way up inaccessible cliffs, behind a waterfall, in the gouge of a fault in the earth surrounded by eternal sulphur clouds, above a rushing torrent, lava flow or seeping toxic mire, these places seem like home to them. Vapour hides the sun, which they prefer, but also veils the stars they love to look upon. At night Herald's may venture far from their hidden homes for no greater reason than to gaze upon the night sky

The Embassies are spirals in the stone. They carve the rock in curls, embedding smoothly shifting flows of empty space linked by halls whose walls and floors are gentle helices. Imagine walking through, at tiny size, the cast-off clothing of a growing Nautilus, the empty shell made rampant, silences engorged and intersecting spaces multiplied, the shadows pierced by single points of light. The Herald's love light. Not too much. Not sunlight or burning fires, not heat or desiccation, but cool, calm single points, each with its own character and tale. The Embassies are always dark, with single sources of azure, virid, incarnadine or starlight-white light in every room, each source different and unique. No two lights are ever quite the same.

Here guests are received and treasures kept. Most especially collected spines. The Trench Herald's chief desire and primary currency is spines. These spines must be diseased and strange combinations of creature and disease are valued most. It is not the body part itself that they require, but the products of stilled combat between disease and life. Each sickness provokes certain responses from a living thing; each living thing reacts in its own way. Unexpected and remarkable reactions can take place, things impossible to simulate or copy in the deep dark under the sea. This is why the Herald's are sent, to seek out and trade for this strange currency.

The curved spine tubes are made of gold, a pure and durable casing that will not react or stain the chemistry inside. They are ranked up like the cases of strange musical instruments. There are lesser treasures too, jars of cold black glass with tumours kept inside, slivers of the flesh of brains, brains of remarkable beings, infected with remarkable things. Gold, of course, stained with the silt of the abyssal trench where it fell so long ago, gold with which the Herald pays, exchanging it for the rare organic treasures that it seeks.

And Light. The light is a personal trade, it plays no part in the Herald's assigned task but they do love it so. Few Herald's return to the deep without some private light-emitting treasures stowed away. A thing they love most is a permanent, unique and inexhaustible source of gentle light. For these they will make secret trades. Some carry magical things, lost in eons past, caked in black trench mud that cracks off showing gold and strange pearlescence of an ancient time. Items of power. They will swap them happily for less-significant rough-equivalents if the traded item emits an unusual light.

They do not fully understand what death is and this makes them dangerous to be around. In the culture of the Herald's, each being is made of many kinds of, interacting life. They live and die in a cacophony of birth and death, fading and renewing all the time. They are a colony of things. They assume that everybody is.

If someone dies around a Herald, they will keep speaking, addressing the microfauna consuming the corpse from within. If not prevented or advised otherwise, the Herald will 'garden' all the forms of life upon the corpse into a coherent whole, inhabiting the old form. It is the polite thing to do. Like helping someone who falls sick at your home, or offering new clothes to someone who has spilt their soup. They will educate this colony of things in how to consume the remaining chemical memories of its former host, how to walk in its body, then politely let it go. This may take time, but the time of the Herald's is not ours, they wait, in the dark reaches of the sunless deep. To wait an hour, a month, a year, a day, it makes little difference to them.

Though the Herald's are by no means evil beings, they are so alien and strange that to most people they may as well be. They prefer to deal with intelligent Undead, or other very long-lived and indifferent individuals. Unprejudiced: the surface as a whole is strange to them, they value calm, politeness and a discreet hand. You can never be sure how someone will react when you ask them for a spine.



TYCHOCLAST

Patient gamesters. Ruthless destroyers. Masters of strategy. The Tychoclasts wait and watch from behind faces scored and cross-hatched with unwinnable games.

They stand like black impassive knights. Roughly humanoid, arms and forearms heavy and long, extending almost to the knees. Along the arms are lined organic spikes. Their shoulders and upper back spattered with black ventricles, eternally spewing gas, hot and cold, equalising the Tychoclasts relationship with the world.

The fumes wreath them in boiling steam, dense icy fog or unknowable varicoloured fumes. The surface of the Tychoclast can be warm to the touch, then cold, then warm again, all within a seconds flow, with no pause or shift between the extremes but only a constant flickering, like a shadow moving fast across the wall. The natural world rebelling from their shape and slavering off them in strange microphenomina.

Their movements are steady, deliberate and always to a knowable aim. Their voices are like screams choked in the throat, each syllable forced through by strength of will.

(The Tychoclasts have a surplus of willpower, they cannot be frightened or distracted. They can be confused.)

They are creatures of chaos, bonded and suppressed by their own free will. Angels of madness and transformation in self-designed black straightjackets formed like human beings, traitors to a centreless cause. Inside the armour is an intelligent, unknowable spume of raw chaos, fluctuating and boiling, twisting like a man held underwater reaching for air. The substance of this chaos being feels as if it is drowning. Locked here in a world of rational action where its nature can never fully be expressed.

It is in pain. It will not die. It chose to be here and become this thing.

The sheer randomness of those impossible worlds or shimmering after-lives where chaos rules mean that of all the creatures which come to being there, a few, a very small few, should wish not to be what they are. In a place where everything is possible, however briefly, the only impossible desire is for stability, certainty, rules. Iron rules.

So a small trickle of these other beings leave that place and come here. They bind themselves in these forms, for reasons of their own, they score their own featureless faces with deeply abstracts representing the negation of chance, the futility of randomness, the necessity of fate. These marks are their true name now, they can no longer be summoned by their old.

Some of these being are what we might call 'Daemons' or 'Monsters' others are Spirits or incomprehensible knots of space and time. it doesn't matter what they were before, they are Tychoclasts now.

They live primarily in deserts, sometimes on freezing fields of ice. Always it is somewhere still and quiet, where not much goes on. Somewhere predictable. They build their spires of the same semi-organic material as their suits. They aim for straightness and perfection. Always they fail, the spires are strange, twisted, asymmetric and disturbing. Sometimes they soak up the colour or aesthetic of the surrounding lands, or oppose it. Sometimes they look like burning glass.

The Tychoclasts can often not perceive this. Like the victim of a stroke, they cannot see the curve in their own line.

Sometimes the sky above the spire shows alien suns and altered light shines down.

Best not to mention this.

The Tychoclasts will always act within a reasonable set of rules if they have been rationally agreed, they regard the ability and desire to set rules and live by them as a basic necessity of meaningful life. So, to them, an ant has more meaning, a bird has less.

Few things drive them to rage, but they are deeply angered by artists, bards, storytellers and the conception of story itself. A narration is simply a list of things, it is never its own thing, attempts to live as if it is are a sign of evil and must be destroyed.

And they hate randomness, unpredictability and chaos.

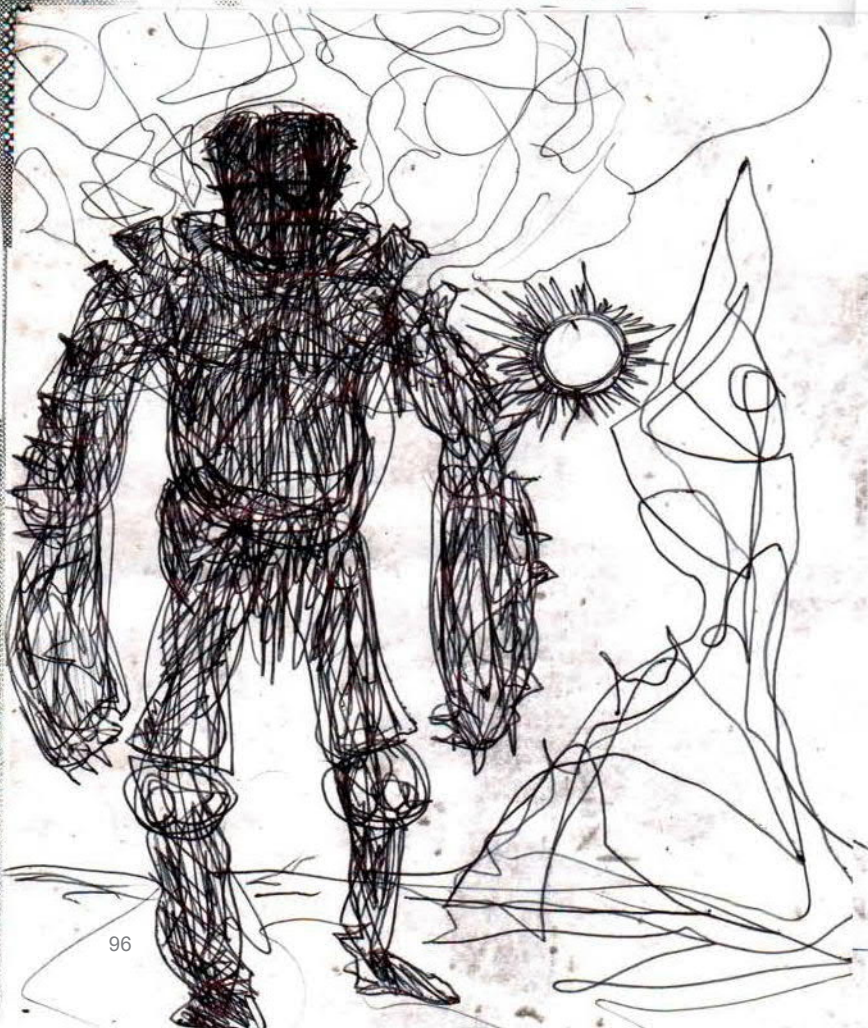
They are not fond of adventurers.

Tychoclasts can use the suppressed chaos of their bodies to shape small zones matter in almost any way they wish. They hate doing this, all of them attempt to learn the physical skills of craft. Tool use, design, blacksmithing, anything in which they can use their hands to make, without releasing the pure power of chaos.

But they will do so if they must. A Tychoclast can alter a chunk of matter roughly equivalent to a large box that can be held between both hands. More powerful Tychoclasts can alter greater volumes depending on their native power. The rank of Tychoclasts (they are ordered in carefully recorded hierarchies) can be reduced for making use of this power. It is always a sorrowful thing to fail.

Breaching the surface of a Tychoclast suit to kill the thing inside is obviously very bad for anyone near. The raw chaos escapes, causing mutation and alteration of any nearby living thing, as well as the landscape itself.

(Conspiracy theorists suggest that the Tychoclasts are not true enemies of chaos, but engaged on some eons-long double bluff. That they are subjecting themselves to the stress of 'reality' to put their core of anti-causality under enormous pressure. That they are building something from it, a new god of chaos. A demon plane. A city of reflecting flame.)



UMBRA-TECHNICAL ELEMENTAL

"How to write of shadows is a question worth asking. A shadow is a very beautiful thing and there is a treasury of shadow, accounted over time, that fears its losing." - Zenithal

The world itself breeds shadows as it turns, but these are shadows of the world, they share the long low life of stone and sleep. All shadow is a dream of something else and dreams themselves can rarely wake. The darkness curled behind a waterfall while sunlight chatters through the falling veil might murmur to itself like people crowded sleeping in the dark, but still, it cannot talk, not quite aware, it dies with every setting sun, enfolded back into the encompassing night and is born again each day, washed cleaner than a beach, with no more memory than the sand.

From gloom to dark and back again, like tides of light and silence easing vision from the world.

But mankind breaks this chain. Man builds and those built things have shadows and the shadow of a building is both more and less than the shadow of the water or the stone.

Less because no man-made thing, no matter how strong or long preserved, can measure much against the great life and the deep slow cycles of the earth. A pyramid is delicate, compared to the continent on which it stands, a stone tomb is more fragile than the rain that casts along its sides.

But more as well. More for their complexity. More for regularity: straight lines! Geometry! Perfect arcs and perfect circles interacting in one thing. For its nested symmetry, for its layers, for its sculptures; stone shadows of life themselves birthing new shadows on the ground. For its glass, that unearthly frozen liquid, cradling an invisible dark. And lit. By lamps, by candles, by burning sacrificial fires. By light reflected from a relic's gold, or an idol's ruby eye. Lit and shadowed from within, from outside bathed twice daily in advancing and retreating gloom. A nest of wild complexity, of lines and forms and natural shapes, of sacred words and coloured glass, of images and messages and continual slow ritual. Shadow upon shadow upon shadow over decades, over centuries.

Here, in this incubator of near-dark, in this experiment of shade, the shadows learn.

This still takes time, for shadows learn quite slowly, often forgetting what they are. Most shadow believes that it is light, it runs towards the rising sun and dies. Some thinks itself a deeper dark and flees endlessly into the night. Many shadows think that they are stone, or living beings, or manufactured things. You can see these clinging to their objects, hiding in their cracks and hurrying at their heels. A certain kind of shadow believes that it is beauty, it hunts women and hides in the centres of gems. When it finds a certain woman that it likes, it adores her, softly embracing her face with the gentlest touch, stroking under her cheeks and chin, erasing signs of age, transforming eyes to burning pools. When this shadow falls in love it often falls for life, it will cling to her through old age, into death, and tenderly hold her bones in the dark.

But shadow does not name itself, not straight away. It is relational, it springs from something else, to know itself takes time.

"By my analysis the light outside must wax and wane at least one hundred thousand times, while inside there must be continual, or semi-continual light. Neither total light or darkness may prevail. So: a large building (very large is best), of great inner complexity, inhabited and in use for at least three hundred years. At this stage we stand a small chance of the catalysation of shadow into life. A shadow-elemental, but one created by the shadow of built things. Teche-Umbra, or Umbra-Technical if you will, the living shadow of made things." - Ashkott.

The form of an Umbra-Technical Elemental can differ a great deal. It learns shape and life from its environment, and so often begins by mimicking those shapes and those small lives. A bird is common first, plumaged in gloom, composed of rippling darkness like the tangle in the centre of a wine-knot as it pours into a glass. A young Umbra-Technical Elemental will generally do versions of the things its living double does. It will nest and peck, swoop and flutter, simply a dark bird amongst the rest. In southern climes a bat is also a common initial form. It haunts and possesses one particular building, or a very closely nested group of buildings. It never leaves the shadow, avoiding both absolute darkness and direct light.

At any time this living embroidery of night can fly apart, disappearing into the shadows of its home and reappearing wherever it so desires, so long as shadows lie there.

At first it is unlikely that anyone will realise that the shadow in the rafters is alive. But as time trickles by and centuries pass, as the shadow grows in size and power, it becomes intelligent and self-aware. The Elemental will often retain its initial shape as a kind of theme-of-form, but it gradually learns new shapes from what it sees and the things its shadows enfold. If it grows inside a religious building, then it will learn the forms sculpted on its walls, or painted there.

Eventually it will be able to assume the shape depicted in any of the sculptures or images in the building, and act as they would, physically at least. It can also choose to look like anyone inside the building now.

It can learn languages, but speaks only in a whisper, sometimes appearing to those who are alone, wearing a human shape, communicating some vital message that it hopes will ensure the buildings survival.

It may give its name as that written on some ancient tomb, or the name the building had in ages past, in another language, in another time.

When angered or enraged, it can attack, doing physical harm. It can also bring blindness, or even madness with a touch, though neither blindness, harm nor madness will last long outside the buildings walls.



And they can charm, seduce and love and fall in love. Beauty and its love was often worked into the stone that gave them birth, it is command and vulnerability to them. They can appear as people of great beauty, charming some to service and taking lovers if they wish, but they can lose themselves as well. Should they charm a person to their service, if they are beautiful there is a chance that the Umbra-Technical itself could fall in love, and when it does it falls forever, till its lover dies, then loves their bones.

The more time drifts past, the more powerful the Umbra-Technical becomes. Ultimately, it can enfold all shadows in the building onto one great organism, compressed and folded under the roof like an eagle packed into its shell. It is every shadow, everywhere inside that space.

Umbra-Technicals are neither evil nor good. What they care about is place. They are connected to the walls that birthed them, to the pillars and the stones to the windows and the lamps that burned. Acting to defend the shadows of that place, protecting them from too much dark or too much light. This usually leads it into a symbiotic relationship with the mortal guardians of its home. They both want the same things. Slow permanence, repetition, gloom, and for the stones to never fall.

UNGULIX

"I am glad that the Ungulix, (that spine'd malevolence) is rare, but sadder still to find it rare enough that no-one will believe it real!" -

(I have never claimed the Ungulix a hoax, I say only that there is not proof. A single data-point is not enough - Z)

"Although there is no record of them anywhere, although never seen by anyone but I and that rarely, I swear to you the Ungulix is true!"

A compressible, winding creature, with the size and height and strength of limb of those very large hounds used for hunting wolves, yet squirmish and tractomorphic like a cat or mustelid. Ungulix combine the aspects of the Lizard and the rabid dog. They stand four-square with their backs arched in a curve, but can also slide and slither, curl and twist, they can fit into any space that might hold a slightly build contortable man. The back is ridged with slanting triangular spines. Though sharp, these spines cannot be bone, for they can bow or lie back, permitting Ungulix to better hide and crawl through cracks and narrow gaps.

Its feet are clawed, a little like a dogs, the claws extend and rasp when the Ungulix is hungry and help it walk upon the ground. The head is maddening and crazed, its eyes are coloured pearls, oddly sized and never the same shade. Its jaw is an uneven mess with grating triangular teeth, designed for ripping flesh. A lashing tail rounds off the end.

Ungulix are an ugly, irregular, black-columbine, like a diseased and dirty dove and when they come they bring a kind of ruined air: A blotchiness or spattering, not of the vision, but of space itself, unnerving inversions of light, dark fireflies burning inverted flame, spinning and winking in and out.

Ungulix come always from below, they live under things and can be under anything, under tables, under chairs, under wardrobes, under beds, under carpets, under logs under sheds or sleeping dogs. Perhaps not under dogs. But anywhere you see an under-surface out of sight, from under there the Ungulix may squeeze, rasping its teeth and rolling its eyes.

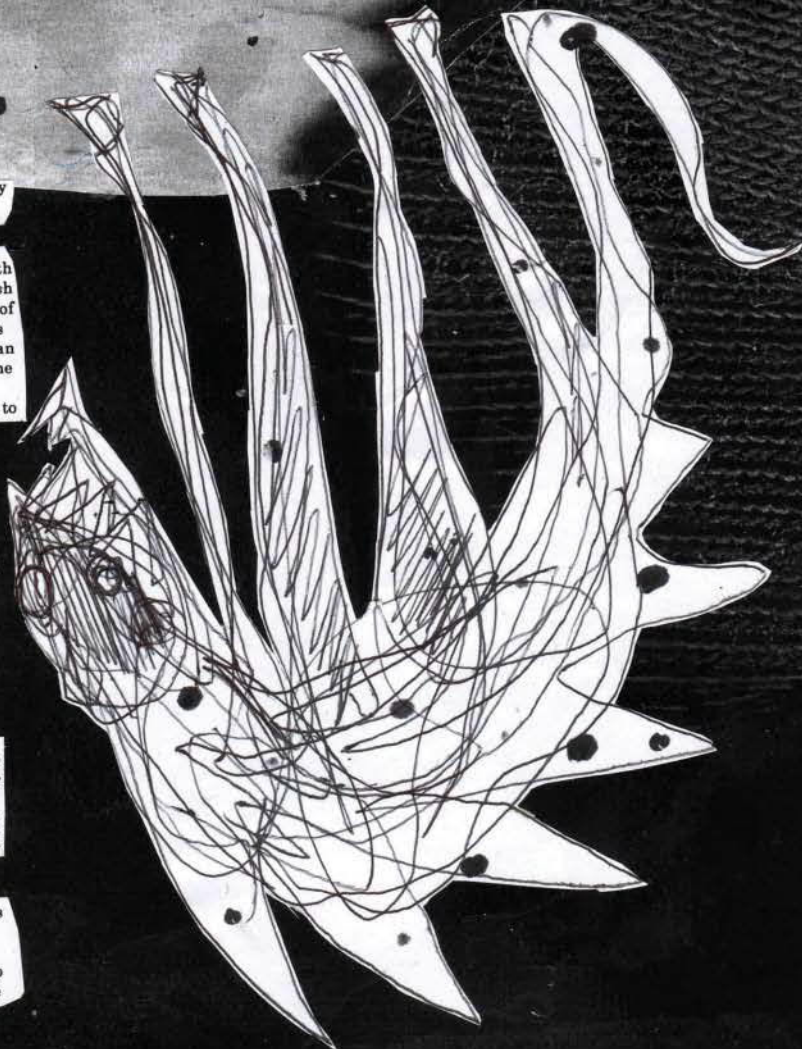
Most unpleasantly, the Ungulix is upside down. It advances slowly, claws gripping the ground. If distracted, it falls upward to the roof. Once up there it leaps happily about the ceiling, but if the roof is high and it wishes to seize upon you it must carefully climb down the walls and creep to you across the floor. Rugs. Rugs are happy things and key in defence against the Ungulix.

It is rare for them to continue pursuit outside the house, the sky is deadly to them. (Though once they did venture to chase me through a densely wooded copse, leaping across the bottoms of the interlaced branches). If they should 'fall' outside, I have seen no limit to its fall, they disappear into the sky. Lure them outside!

As much as Ungulix can appear underneath anything at all without warning, they can also disappear the same way, which they will quickly do should circumstances turn against them. They are frustrating and devilish opponents! As soon as any sign of help arrives, they leap away and squirm back under the bed. If the bed is overturned, nothing is found, the Ungulix are gone.

I have pointed out the claw marks on my ceiling, the scratches on my rugs, my cuts and bruises and the gnaw marks on my lintels upside down, all to no avail! I have described the blotching in the air and been prescribed pills. Everywhere I meet a doubting gaze. An old, deluded, drunk, once-famous man, lonely and traumatised from a lifetime of wonders, obsessed with monsters, either desperate for attention, or simply mad, chasing myself through my own house, ruining my things and chewing on my own lintels. It is true the Ungulix come mainly when I drink, but this is part of their design.

I believe they prefer to take by ambush, hunting lone people, appearing under the bed, then snatching the victim and carrying them off to their upside-down world. Surprise, I venture is the greatest weapon of the Ungulix. Nothing could be more reasonable than for an ambush predator hunting intelligent prey with an inflexible tactic to spread out its attacks over as wide an area as possible, taking only lone individuals, making sure that no message of its presence ever spreads. Imagine secret wolves, or what a tiger could achieve with clothes and a key to the house!



This explains why the Ungulix hunt me still, and why they do so in such careful secrecy. I have exposed their scheme. It was only my preternatural awareness and unusual state of ever-ready preparation, gained over long years of adventure and danger, that allowed me to survive the first Ungulix attack at all. They must have thought me a tempting target, an old man, past his prime, sleeping, perhaps somewhat drunk, alone, unarmed.

How wrong they were! The rogues took a taste of my duelling stick and I escaped through the window into the snow.

Their hunting of me will not cease. As long as I live and speak the truth I am a danger to them. They must destroy me, and they must do so secretly, without evidence or witnesses to watch. If they can do this then my lone voice may go unheeded, lost in time, and the Ungulix may continue their predations without restriction.

And so my lonely duel goes on. I know they will come for me. When alone, from somewhere underneath. What if a bookshelf falls? I am old now and I can stand neither company nor too many nights outdoors. It is only a matter of time. They seek me from their topsy turvy world, and I would have this done." - Juglansing Leptoblast

VITELLARY

A bright cyclopic fly that crawls upon your skin and can't be touched. It turns the world to words.

If a fat and well-fed Glyphapillar is burnt in a hot orange flame, it leaves black segmented chrysalis upon the ground, like seeds of living coal. These lie in the ashes for a day or so, then as tree-ash cools, they crack and bright Vitellary clamber out, gold from coal, an alchemists trick fulfilled.

Vitellary have a smooth round thorax and a headless abdomen which holds both eye and wings and from which the legs descend. The Vitellary's eye is blank, white and perfectly round. The two sharp swept-forward wings move far too quickly for an eye to see, a hummingbird-blur. The spiked legs hang straight down.

The horror of the Vitellary is: it cannot be struck at or removed. As the hand comes down to swat it off the skin, it freezes in mid-air or swerves to strike around the mark. Pinched fingers sent to pick it off will likewise turn aside, pinching flesh or empty space. The fly runs along your arm, you flail, it skitters up your chest, you beg for help, it runs across your face and lays against the corner of your eye, feeding on your tears, you scream and clutch at empty air. It may do as it wishes with your body and your skin, you cannot take it off.

Methods of removal are dangerous and few. If only one or two Vitellary are present then containment: (throwing a wet towel over the offending limb) and rapid amputation do the trick. Teasing the fly onto a smaller finger and rapidly striking it off at the joint with a knife can work as well.

Non-conscious animals can swat the flies, as can people-asleep who do it in a dream. A thin sheet of acid or flame, indifferently applied, can drive them off.

"Simply roll your child in fine flour, beat them till only a thin sheen remains. Tell them to close their eyes and apply a living flame, make sure to turn away. A swift and harmless conflagration will ensue, its end: mild singing and harmless murdered flies falling to the ground like rain." - Leptoblast

Pushing someone underwater can sometimes cause the flies to leave. Debate rages over a sharp unprompted dunking works the best, or slow immersion, causing the Vitellary to gradually migrate to the top of the head or tip of the nose. Hopefully to fly away.

But there are dangers, for the Vitellary only land on human skin to mate. When you see them dash in circles on your flesh, you know the end is soon to come. Once impregnated, the female fly injects her eggs directly, driving them under your skin to gestate. And just as with the fly, the eggs cannot be deliberately removed. If you frighten the Vitellary, it may panic, injecting unfertilised eggs that will rot under the flesh, or burrowing itself. Either of these grim events might be preferred to that of host to Vitellary young.

The maggots crawl towards the brain. Slowly, over several days, they burrow through the body underneath the skin. They move up the neck and when they reach the skull they disappear, diving like cetaceans. Spiralling into the mind.

Whatever they do there, whether by consuming some hidden organ of thought, secreting an unknown oil or radiating cryptic waves that jangle the glands of the brain, it alters the cognition of the mind.

The first sign often comes with blood. The host, if cut or wounded in a minor way, will look down at the tear, and see, instead of liquid, a stream of tiny crimson words. The words are 'bloodbloodbloodblood', running in a river of red words. From this point on the effect intensifies and expands. Single fingers are replaced by long thin words reading 'finger' and jointed to the hand, which slowly becomes 'hand', still living at the end of the arm.

This change encompasses the world. All things are named and seen as their name. The Vitellary-Blindness.

"An inaccurate and unfair name. The Vitellary victims are not blind, they can see and find their way about well enough. True, many do go mad and gouge out their own eyes, but this does little good. The fresh Glyphapillars are still slowly growing in their brain and cannot be removed. Most learn, somehow, to adapt to this brief world of words instead of shapes. And in fact there are advantages for some.

The words are always literal and more than one doomed sufferer has claimed that the Vitellary blindness lets them see things as they really are. I heard a story of one man who saw, walking towards him, the word 'bandit' in a human shape, who then addressed him as a friend. It's said this secret knowledge saved his life, such as it was. Others have discerned the letters T.R.A.P. where friends saw but a boon.

For those who work the Subtle Art the Vitellary blindness holds a special fascination of its own. Many are the tales of certain spells and mysteries exposed by those who could watch their effects or lens their secrets with a verbal eye. To see the secrets of the world unfurled in words, a tantalising proposition for scholars and philosophers of every kind. If only there was some way to survive the worms. But so far there is not." - Zenithal

Eventually the victim goes into seizure, their skull cracks open and shining Glyphapillars wander out and crawl in search of wood to eat and trees in which to sit.

The Vitellary is feared above all other insect kind, the sight of one can empty rooms and send families fleeing into the street. A swarm can empty villages, a plague can make whole cities refugees.

Few can stomach the nightmare of seeing a loved one covered with the yellow flies, both of you knowing the flies will soon lay eggs inside their flesh. Some leap into bonfires in despair, and should they survive, no matter how mutilated or burnt, may think themselves fortunate indeed.

Dark stories tell of those who use the Vitellary for deliberate and evil ends. Of swamp-drunk tribes who cover certain members in the flies, making them utterly immune to attack. For, if you cannot strike a Vitellary off the flesh, neither can you strike flesh where it is. Someone covered in the golden-yellow flies, or riddled with the bumps of their eggs, cannot be directly harmed.

Other legends tell of Shaman deliberately infecting themselves to see with world in words, or of wealthy workers of the subtle art abducting innocents and giving them the blindness, forcing them to look upon strange mysteries and speak of what they see.

VORE BULL

"A hecatomb empire, endlessly sacrificed. A kingdom of cattle and the wronged, obsessed with justice and revenge, where nothing is forgotten and all things are accounted for and measured in the eye of a merciless god. An old culture, whose faith is a cult of mystery, holding light but taken through dark places. A place of hunger and renewal, civilised and savage, cultured and self-consuming. Cannibals? Possibly, very possibly. Though I doubt if they thought of it that way. For them, it was a cycle, endlessly renewed. Silent though, nothing written by them has survived the years, only images carved far from the sun. Perhaps they built and said much more than this and all their greater monuments are lost or worn away. Perhaps they simply liked to carve within the dark. Only these deep, secreted places have survived. Passions in stone, similar images flickering under the lamplight. Always the same figures, though the carvings may be a thousand miles apart. The Bull. The Judge. The Sacrifice. The Army of the Bulls. The Consumption. Then a long darkness and the hints of a rebirth." - Zenithal

"Stammel is a rogue with her sources: she notices everything, never footnotes, and compulsively translates everything into Ancient Auralent regardless of the original language. Nevertheless, I offer here my translation of her translation of the original, found who knows where. (She certainly did not write it down.) Probably dredged up from the recollections of some ruined elder from one of the Horizon-towns."

The process is a complex one. There are emotional aspects. I will skip over those and get to the point.

A kind of micro-hecatomb is made. I will refer to this as the Activator.

A bull must be found and named. The name must be an anagram of the seeker's name. It must be marked somewhere on the bull. Carved, cut or branded.

The bull is skinned. It is helpful at this time to prop the animal upright with the head tilted back. Strip naked, grease yourself, swallow the Activator and let gravity ease you into the bull. DO NOT cut your way in. It must be through the mouth.

It is helpful to be slight of frame. If you are large of body then the bull must likewise be great in size.

The bull then animates. It stands and walks. Some transmorphism takes place. The rear legs are re-worked, the front transformed to arms and hands, the eyeballs fall away, light comes from within. For as long as the process goes on the bull is virtually indestructible.

A sign or symbol of the bull's new name will appear somewhere on its surface. The exact pattern of this cannot be predicted. It may be a symbol, or string of symbols, initials, or a single word. In some way they relate to the controller of the bull.

It is entirely possible to survive the process. The bull will commit some lethal violence on animation. This is unavoidable. But with effort this can be focused on particular individuals. (To avoid general mayhem.) Beyond this point it can be governed somewhat. On finishing, the controller can simply climb out and vomit up the Activator. Dangerous for the unskilled and unprepared certainly, but not necessarily lethal." - Ashkott

"The wounded ones work first
Those fate has hurt
Angered by the World-Engine
Hungry for the vengeance-meal."

A small thing take they
Mouse or minor beast
Candle-hearted creature, living fast.
Give they their rage,
give it to the beast in whole.
Now anger's fire is pure,
separate from its maker
Burns high in the mouse-heart.
Fierce becomes the beast
wrathful and small.
Let it not escape
For it will kill if it can.

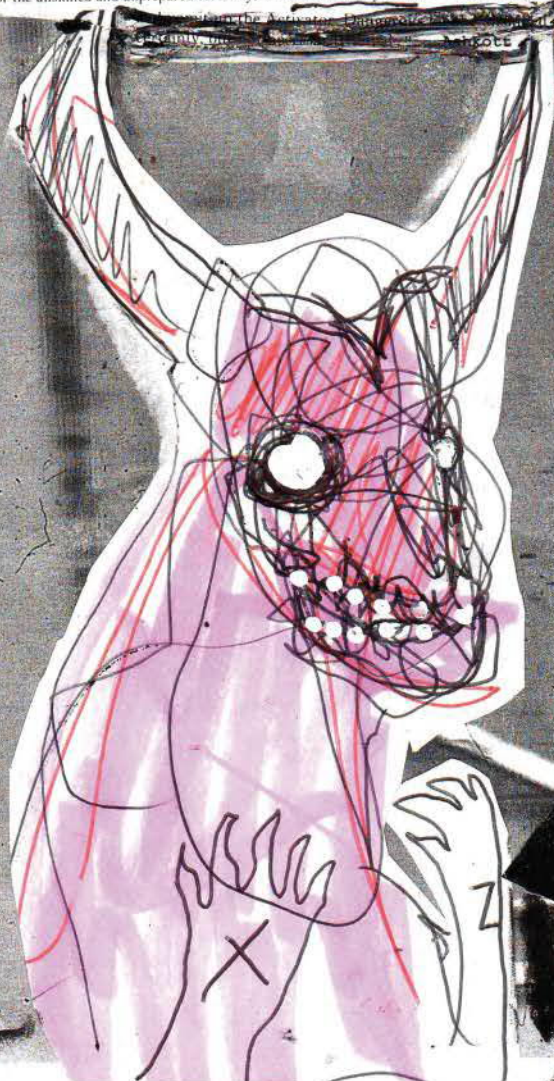
Now the heart is still.
The wounded one looks on their anger
Burning in the tiny heart.
Sees it in its whole.

The wise will end things now,
let be what is and was.
But some
will not.
Call they for the Bull.

Down in the dark belly make their home
eaten by ecstasy
the pure white hatred, stronger than before, pure
the indivisible joy,
moaning in the Bull Belly.

The three are one
till harm is done.
Spirit of revenge
in belly of the man.
Dreaming anger-mind
in belly of the bull.
And bull itself
engine of ruin.
So long as they are linked in chain
not gods not men not death
will cease what comes."

A rather sinister fragment I think you'll agree!" - Leptoblast



WHIRLWIND WURM

"What mystery lies beyond the Wurm?
Many seek it out, yet few return.

The Whirlwind Wurm is pitiful indeed, desperate for friends but cursed by a nightmarish ever-consuming maw.

For the Whirlwind Wurm has teeth in infinite degree!
Teeth without end! One grows every second in its mouth! Its circular lip stained red with the soreness of the ever-growing teeth poking through its gums and abrading its flesh.

The Wurmz are roughly the same size as cows, but simple beasts. Lozenges! Mere cylinders, closed at one end, and weightless in our world, like balloon's bobbing along, carefully working their way about on spindly black limbs, clutching at the ground. If it were to lose its grip upon the earth, the Wurm would float momentarily, and then be caught by a gust or bullied away by a breeze to land who-knows-where?

Beyond the passage of the Inner-Wurm, the 'Road Of Knives', lies a limbo-land, a grey and formless waste forgotten by all. This griseous void sends forth its meek tendrils, hungry, endlessly hungry for existence, for life! Where this questing pseudopod of nullity meets our more-vital zone it is bound in flesh, a rude simulacrum of the life it finds. This is the Whirlwind Wurm, a meek and stupid simulated thing, dangerous, but without an aggressive will, endlessly hungry, devouring what it can.

Should you visit that cinereous plain, you will find there a thin and desperate skin of being, a ghostlike pencil-scratch world with paper-thin soil and beings of shadowy bone. This is the world built in painstaking slow degree by the grim consumption of the Wurmz. The sky above it is a cathedral void of grinding teeth, like upturned funnels, each leading up into the long vortex of a Wurm, somewhere in the lands we know. And from these Wurmz come vague irregular showers of stone and flesh, mud and soil, sprinklings of matter to feed and sustain the thin world hanging in the void." - Leptoblast

"There were six black eyes equidistant round its perfectly circular mouth.

The teeth were very like a sharks, but curved inwards slightly with both serrated edge and point. The teeth grew in a spiral, leading 'in'. I am not certain if a new tooth does indeed breach 'every second' but they do appear at quick and regular intervals. As new teeth grow in around the mouth the rest shuffle back inside the Wurm. The sound of the teeth growing and adjusting is quite loud, like a washing basket full of ceramic knives slowly churning round.

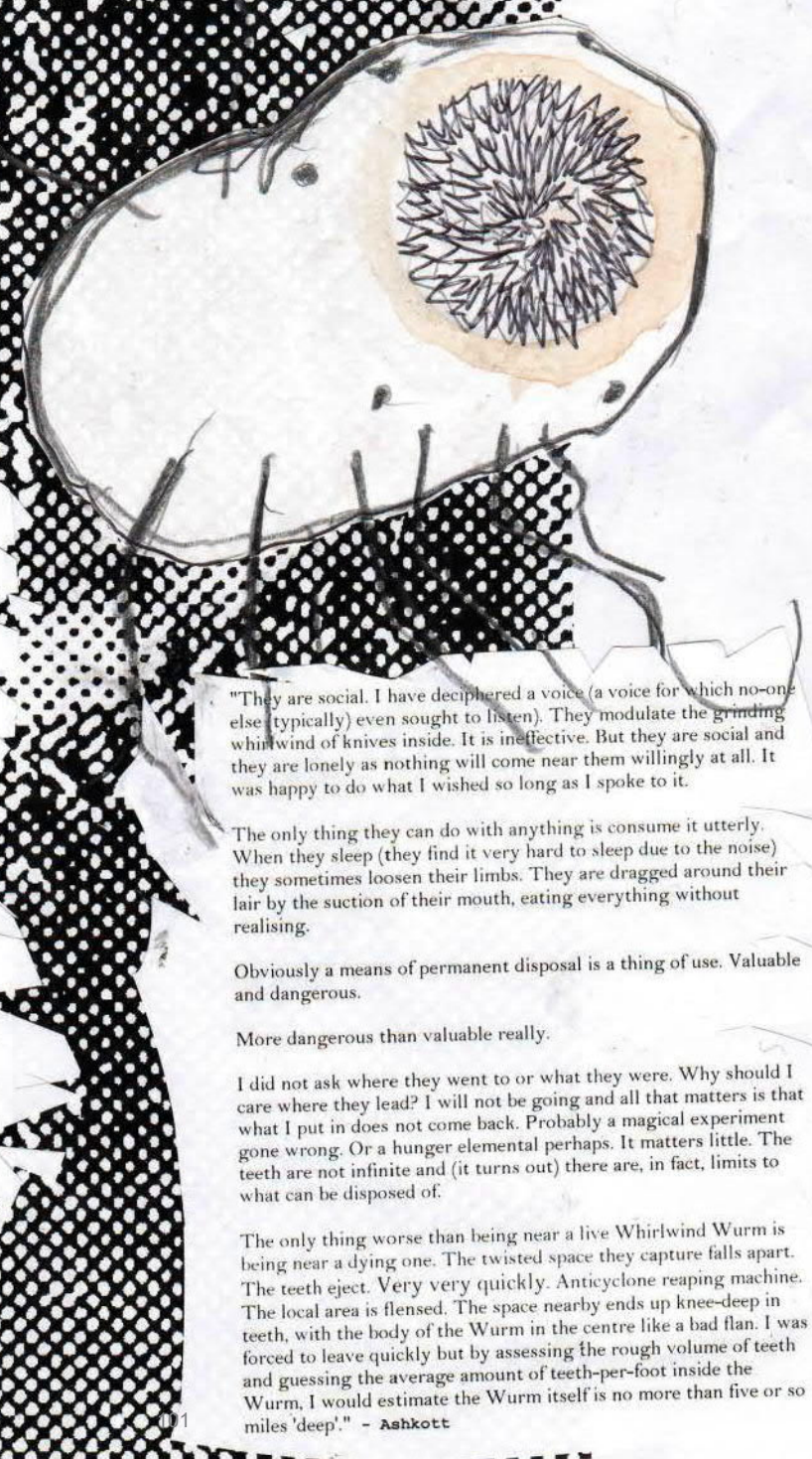
I was reluctant to stand directly before the Wurm itself as anything that goes into its mouth does not come out, but a brief glimpse showed teeth, arranged in endless rows, spiralling deep into the distance out of sight. On a wild impulse, perhaps doubting the evidence of my own eyes, I spun my lantern in my hands and hurled it onto the Wurm. The light disappeared, as if falling for a long while before going out. It seemed to do the Wurm no harm, but the creature did let go of the ground with its black limbs. It bobbed a little, frantically trying to regain purchase, but was already a little too high to clasp on. It began, slowly at first, to spin along its axis in the air.

Possibly I should have rendered aid at this point, but I was still wary of the creature's mouth. Seeing that it was taken by a breeze, I seized this opportunity to investigate its lair.

The cave was utterly utterly smooth, any projections of stone had been chewed and scoured away. The area nearby was free of life, animal or vegetable, the soil had been stripped and the rock beneath likewise worn down to a smooth plate. This was part of the reason the Wurm had such difficulty keeping its footing on the smooth stone.

As to the 'mystery of the Wurm', I am afraid I have no idea. The seemingly infinite inner gullet of teeth must go somewhere. If it is a means of feeding for some being or place then I think it must be a poor one. The Wurmz themselves are aimless, hungry yes, but poorly focused, seeming to know little of what they do. If it is a gateway then it is a strange one, made to allow access only in one direction and to make any attempt at moving the other way as painful and damaging as possible.

They remind me of the logic of prisons and divine torture more than anything else, a long entry with the exit theoretically within grasp, yet always out of reach. Though poetic, the conception of the Whirlwind Wurm as a gateway to Hell, and that to escape, the hell-bound must simply crawl all the way through the worms tooth-ed throat, is not entirely without cause." - Zenithal



"They are social. I have deciphered a voice (a voice for which no-one else typically even sought to listen). They modulate the grinding whirlwind of knives inside. It is ineffective. But they are social and they are lonely as nothing will come near them willingly at all. It was happy to do what I wished so long as I spoke to it.

The only thing they can do with anything is consume it utterly. When they sleep (they find it very hard to sleep due to the noise) they sometimes loosen their limbs. They are dragged around their lair by the suction of their mouth, eating everything without realising.

Obviously a means of permanent disposal is a thing of use. Valuable and dangerous.

More dangerous than valuable really.

I did not ask where they went to or what they were. Why should I care where they lead? I will not be going and all that matters is that what I put in does not come back. Probably a magical experiment gone wrong. Or a hunger elemental perhaps. It matters little. The teeth are not infinite and (it turns out) there are, in fact, limits to what can be disposed of.

The only thing worse than being near a live Whirlwind Wurm is being near a dying one. The twisted space they capture falls apart. The teeth eject. Very very quickly. Anticyclone reaping machine. The local area is flensed. The space nearby ends up knee-deep in teeth, with the body of the Wurm in the centre like a bad flan. I was forced to leave quickly but by assessing the rough volume of teeth and guessing the average amount of teeth-per-foot inside the Wurm, I would estimate the Wurm itself is no more than five or so miles 'deep'." - Ashkott

WOUND WHISP

Every time a wound is healed by some other-natural art there is a small chance that a Wound Whisp will be made. By some mistaken craft, the wound itself is not repaired but removed to some other imperceptible, inaccessible space. The remaining flesh knitted directly side-to-side, ignoring the now-missing intervening gash.

The place where they are sent to, throbs, overfull with timeless living wounds, abstracted from their hosts, slowly growing sentence and going mad. They are half-completed things like rivers in mid-flow, whose life is often death, born in violence and descending towards the long low sleep of a scar or the transforming rapture of decomposition in which the wound becomes the world. Here the wound can neither sleep nor change and sometimes one escapes and finds its way back to the world of men.

The Wound Whisp is a ribbon or curl of flesh, sometimes bloodstained skin, sometimes raw meat. It is around eight feet long and floats vertically in the air, its tip and tail curling and lashing in spirals. (This is not the size of the wound as it was made nor as it would be if returned, it is magnified, intensified, by its abstraction from the world.) Two strips of blood-black body serve as hands, they are textured like black pudding, composed of coagulated blood. Its weird eyes float around like badly boiled eggs or fruit that has gone off, there's something like a nose, and a terrible mouth, a deeper, darker, blacker place within that span of active damage. Its maw is black inside, like the unseeable inside of a wound, somehow hinting of liquid. Triangular and long, it is lined with razor teeth.

The Wound Whisp is always frightened, tired and angry. It is an incompleteness in the air and it can never sleep. Healing is the wounds rest, death its dream, without these they go mad.

Composed of pure harm, the Wound Whisp need fear no harmful thing. Any weapons made to hurt will simply deepen the wound; swords and knives expand it with each blow. It can sometimes be restrained, or bound by Subtle Art. Curative magics can damage it and drive it off, fire can cauterise it into a floating scab, but it cannot be fully killed. It is neither diabolic, evil, or undead but simply incomplete. All it wants is a body in which to rest and finally sleep. It does not know or care whether moving into a body will kill the host or not. Healing slowly over time, or simply bleeding out and decomposing in the ground, both are equal in its mind.

The Wound Whisp would prefer to return to its original mother or father. Its mother is whoever suffered the wound, its father is whoever dealt it. These people may be very hard to find, but if they live the Wound Whisp knows where both will be and can track them down with an unerring sense. If dead, the Wound Whisp wanders the world, sometimes hiding in the dark and weeping tears of blood, clenched around the absence at its core, sometimes bursting into manic drive and setting off into the wilderness to encounter who it will, asking for its parents in a ghastly voice that sounds like tearing meat. If it finds someone enough like either its mother or its sire, or simply becomes wracked by its long exile, it will seek to weave itself into any being of flesh and blood.

The wound may rest for a while in rocks or trees, hiding as a seeping crack, or trapeze around in animals, but it is never happy there and will not stay. It needs a person to bear it like a mother bears a child.

A Wound Whisp can bite terribly with its gawping triangular mouth, and is hard to stop. It can slowly worm its way through walls and doors, creeping like a slow crack then breaking out into itself again. Once it nests inside your flesh it does only the damage of the wound it originally was. A knife wound will produce a stabbing gash, an axe wound will produce a furrow and perhaps a broken bone, but beyond that point it does no more and will heal naturally on its own like any wound. (Of course a decapitating strike will take off your head, it is hard to know ahead of time exactly what kind of wound it will be.)

A Wound Whisp wound remains intelligent and self aware, even in your flesh, it can perceive and speak, flapping the torn skin like a mouth, until it becomes a scar. Even after then some dull dreaming awareness is retained. It is surprisingly well-disposed towards the one that bears it, it has, from its point of view, found a new mother and will offer what assistance it can from its limited perspective so long as it is allowed to follow its natural course. It may speak to its new parent advising them of things learnt over its strange existence. It can tell them about its original parents, it can cry out to warn them of danger they can't see. Even when become a scar it may wake them in the night with stabs of pain if it perceives danger near.

If any attempt is made to heal a Wound Whisp in the body by Subtle Art, it will scream with the bloody mouth it made from their flesh and burrow deeper in, becoming an internal wound. This can be dangerous indeed.

XAXAVRAZNAZAK

The Xaxavraznazak is fast and black. A long body like seahorse, serpent or an eel used as a dangerous flag. Big mad spider legs, galloping like clockwork bursting from a broken clock. Taller than a tall tall horse, but shorter than a small giraffe. The Xaxavraznazak is flickering and cantering, turning in one place to look around. Huge eyes like white moth-holes in dark cloth, and a black Mohican spray. The Xaxavraznazak is late (it is always has a schedule planned) and it is worried and afraid and it is talking to itself. It is thinking thoughts and talking to itself about its thoughts, and sometimes talking to itself about the thoughts it had about its thoughts. Its thoughts concern it very much. But the Xaxavraznazak is late and it must go. Go now. Go now. Go now now now.

But wait. A thought about a thought occurs.

The Xaxavraznazak is very fast. It is as fast on the ground as a plummeting hawk just before it takes its prey. It is fast fast fast, the Xaxavraznazak. And it does not feel inertia, which is good, for the Xaxavraznazak goes often the wrong way and needs to stop and turn around. This makes it later still! The Xaxavraznazak would like to lose less time. If only it were faster. Just a little. Just a little faster, think what could be done! What plans revealed, what schemes achieved!

Its horde is swift enchantments. A quick device, some shoes that fly, a key that opens any door, a spell that crosses worlds, a horse that springs up from the earth. The treasures that it loves the most are those that give it speed. It does not use the rapid tools: instead, it ponders longingly and dreams of their design.

It wants to understand. It is a scientist, the Xaxavraznazak, (or says it is), which is a philosophy-of-hands (that's what it claims), it has a method which few things survive.

The Xaxavraznazak makes claim that magic is not real; it is merely mathematics, poorly understood. It compulsively confiscates spellbooks and spells of any kind.

"It's for your own good," says the Xaxavraznazak, as it races away at the speed of a plummeting hawk before it takes its prey.

It takes the spells back to its lair, translates them to equations then bakes them into little men which it then eats. It gnaws the raw mathematics right out of their baked bones.

This is diet of the Xaxavraznazak, and not a wise one. Equations are a spiky meal and sometimes the Xaxavraznazak lies on the floor and moans and curls in shapes that look like mis-spelt words with its big mad spider legs kicking out and breaking prison pots and jars, shaking the shelves of its quick machines. But it will eat no other food than spells translated, baked in little men.

Its weird meals give the Xaxavraznazak a special power. It breathes Prismatic Fire, just like a dragons fiery breath, but not. No nothing like that, not at all.

The strange breath of the Xaxavraznazak can do no harm. It is a holographic flame (that's what it says, though what it means no-one is sure), it breaks things into fragments of themselves, each whole, each real, just very very small. Things caught in the breath of the Xaxavraznazak are splintered into lots of tiny versions of themselves. A wall becomes a dozen tiny walls, a sword becomes a pile of tiny swords and people turn into piles of living dolls.

Where before there stood a man, now, after the prismatic fire, there stands, in the shape of the man, a pile of living dolls, each a perfect image of the whole. Then the pile slips and slides and the dolls go skittering all over the floor, waving their tiny arms as it comes down. The Xaxavraznazak runs madly round, collecting all the little men, (it's front legs have extremely discreet claws), talking to itself about its thoughts. It puts them into little bags and takes them to its lair.

There, in the lair of the Xaxavraznazak, it sorts its treasures, the things-of-speed, the magic books, the bags of tiny people. It puts the people into prison-pots and jars. Sometimes it builds small villages and lets them run about. Some Xaxavraznazaks create gigantic labyrinths which take up almost all their space. The maze has tiny gates and complex permutations and no end. Each gate divides in two, forcing the runner to choose. The Xaxavraznazak dumps crowds of tiny people into the complex maze and watches as they run its branching paths. Then collects them at the end and starts again. Making notes.

Often tiny folk escape in ones or twos, they break out of the lair and try to journey home for help. It is a mighty odyssey. There are hawks, commonly, nesting above the entry to the lair of the Xaxavraznazak, and they feed well. Their nests are strewn with tiny skulls.

It's possible the Xaxavraznazak knows how to reverse the action of its breath. It's said that if you can pull out its stomach, full of half-digested maths, cut a slit, force in all the tiny people and cook it like black pudding, then the little versions of the whole will distil back together and emerge as whole again.

But if that is not the case...

Then you just killed the Xaxavraznazak and cooked your friend.

It is a complex situation.

The Xaxavraznazak would claim its breath is merely a technique that anyone could learn, and that gurgling its stomach in a pot will do not good.

But who could trust the Xaxavraznazak?

There are some Subtle Arts the Xaxavraznazak might sometimes use in shame instead of eat. It does love portals, or things that let it move from place to place. If it hears of something far away it thinks it needs and is certain it can't get there any other way, it may, nervously and half-unwilling, use a spell to get there. Then it races back at the speed of a plummeting hawk and lies lies lies in its thoughts about its thoughts about its thoughts.

YAMMAN

Yam Man are creatures of the desert and dry scrub. They live singly, buried up to their noses in the desert sand, looking carefully through narrowed eyes, breathing slow, listening to the wind and the chatter of the owls, in dense impassible patches of cacti and thorns. They can wait there for a long long time.

Yam Man have a symbiotic links with certain owls; tiny and nocturnal things. They burrow in its head, making tunnels in the hard rind amidst its spikes and sleep there in the day. At night the owls hunt, or sometimes carry messages from Yam to Yam in the distant places where they live. The Yam Man have learnt the language of the owls and mutter of them constantly, whispering complaints of the scratching and gossiping birds. Secretly though they are fond and ruthlessly protective of their tiny friends.

At night, the Yam Man walks, followed by the sound of its muttering and a flock of tiny birds.

The Yam-man can be a combative people.

Fatalism plays a large part, the rains can be irregular and years can pass without a drop, the Yam Man waits. Waits in the sand, hoping no-one comes. Continual attempts of various dehydrated passers-by to 'tap the yam', and drink its sustaining juice, breeds a defensive pugilism.

The Yam-Man box well, a little slow on their feet but very observant, and skilled with a counter-punch. The starlit boxing matches of the Yam-Man are spoken of by aging fighters in the backs of bars all over the world, but few have ever seen one done.

Two Yam-Man who have come to occupy the same patch of scrub will formally agree to fight (only so long as they are roughly the same size, no Yam-Man would fight an unsporting match against a much smaller or larger opponent, in this case they will simply sit in the dirt and endlessly argue.)

Once a match has been formally arranged (by owl) the Yam-Man will heave up from their rooty nests, shake free the soil and rocks, and ponderously stroll towards the zone assigned, somewhere deserted, unobserved and deep in the wilderness.

They will meet, greet each other and ask their owls to perch in a ring around the fight. The boundary of the battle will be occupied by softly hooting owls, and other small nocturnal mammals which also gather in the brush and scrub.



There they will begin the Yam Man Slam, a slow yet brutal boxing match which can last until dawn. Yam Man will usually fight in rounds that last about an hour, with intervals of fifteen or twenty minutes during which they will check on their owls and look silently at the stars. A Slam is rarely abandoned unless an Owl is hurt.

Their unusual level of strength and martial skill, Yam Man strike as a monster much larger and more dangerous than they seem to be. Due to their extraordinary toughness and resistance to crushing damage they rarely do significant damage upon one another. Most matches end before dawn due to exhaustion, often with the agreement to a re-match at some future unspecified date.

Yam-Man regard edged weapons as tools of

monstrous cowardice and will react to them with wrath and anger.

However those using only blunt weapons will be treated neutrally while those who fight with their fists will receive cordial, even friendly respect. Especially if they display a high level of pugilistic skill, and sporting honour of course. In these cases, and if it is night, the Yam Man may even agree to spar a little, although this is, of course, not a true Slam.

Each older Yam-Man knows a few unique tricks and moves related to bare-handed fighting and a handful of legendary wise fighters, (or brutal thinkers) claim to have been trained 'in the Hand of the Yam', wandering from Yam to Yam, slowly earning their friendship and respect and learning the secrets of their martial skills.



ZEN BEAST

Its mouth is always gaping, like a lidless eye. Huge, perfectly circular, it collapses like an iris in the light to bite and jam irregular black teeth through bone and punctured flesh like a folding hydraulic machine. Inside the mouth is nothing but absorbing dark, things consumed are never seen again. It stands twelve feet or more, armoured in a matte carapace of dull, dark shades.

The armour-colours shift like grimy oil: a frost-bitten blue, sick chartreuse, browns, blacks and the virid of an ignored wound. Its milky stormy pupiless googly white eyes boil always and emit a moonlight: pseudo-pale. The arms hang like an apes, tipped in knifehands, which look like complex cutlery of bone. They can pierce things and bring them to the creatures mouth, or else they simply slash and stab at what's around.

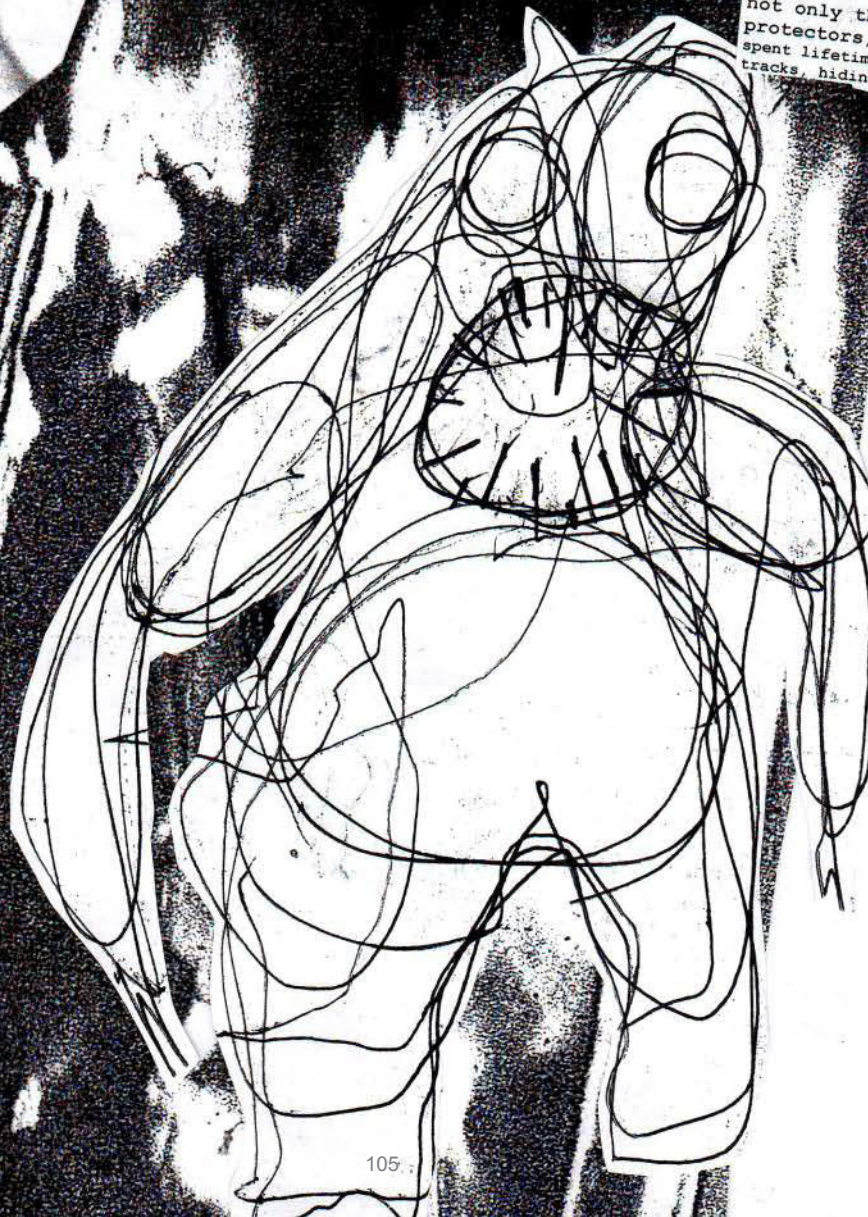
It comes always at night, smashing down trees and biting the heads off bears, aimless in its wrath, seeking destruction and harm. It likes to stamp on heads, to slash, smash, pierce, murder, bite and swallow whole. To ride raw ruin over the world, targeting no particular person, place or group, but assaulting everything that is. And then, beyond the peak of horror but before the dawn, it turns and walks away, seeming to disappear. Those who follow it do not return at all, or find naught but a rumour of monks. Monks in black, tracking the creature silently through the dark.

Some seek perfection in a state of thought. They meditate to find it, diving ever deeper inner seas, the selves lagoons, wild, empty and far from the cognitive sun. There to offer battle. To fight the other impulse in the self, to purify the soul and rise heraldic and inwardly lit.

Many centuries this takes within the dream of thought, and the horror must go somewhere. As the monk meditates the evil seeps slowly out of their skin, a viscous muck that coats them, layering and building over time. There is more inside a person than you'd think.

If the monk can meditate for long enough, as darkness falls the seeping pile will grow and wake, its milky eyes will open, the limbs crack wide and it will walk. The monk is still silently waiting in the belly of the beast, hanging in inverse-lotus, aware but not-aware. They know this is the final stage. Soon they will become a perfect being. First they must resist the sly temptations of the world: the urge to wake and halt the gleeful murders of their refugee self. This is merely a distraction.

These are the Tenebrous Monks, and this the highest aim of their dark faith. They trace the Zen Beast through the night, doing everything they can to keep it safe. The Ascending One must not be lost. Anyone who threatens it must die. Those who hunt the Zen Beast must face not only the thing itself, but its hidden protectors, stealthy, cunning fanatics who have spent lifetimes training for their task, covering tracks, hiding evidence and killing any witnesses.



ZUG-ZUG

"A soulless man or clever beast, with no society and entirely without fear. I thank the gods they come in but ones and twos." - L

Man sized, more slightly built, but dense and strong. You need a hammer to break Zug-Zug bones and their joints can dislocate to absorb deadly force. The Zug-Zug flexes once, arching its cantilevered back and its sockets pop back into place. Zug-Zug skin is rhino-thick and dark dark red with slightly darker rufous fur across their face and back. Barbed puccoon quills lie thickly down its spine, and provide the single weakness of the Zug-Zug: it cannot crawl backwards down a hole it itself has made. Their ears are very tall and stick straight up, their eyes are sly and deeply set. The face is flat and noseless but the muscles of the jaw extend down into the shoulder blades and spine, its neck is hard to break and its bite is strong, it can eat a human femur without tools. ("Zug-Zug never use tools, although they know enough to gnaw on bowstrings in the night." - Z)

They move, hunt, think, attack, escape and sometimes go around, moving forwards all the time in a low continuous lope. They are extremely fast, moving quickly on all fours, climbing well and digging through the dry earth of the pyrrhous Plains. Each night the bone claws at their fingertips and feet extend and they dig a burrow in the ground. This is almost the only time that they are still. Twelve feet down, in a different place each night, the Zug-Zug sleeps. If its home collapses in the night the Zug-Zug just burrows out and carries on its way.

Though it has no home the Zug-Zug has a territory whose borders it patrols. For an active male this can be up to a thousand square miles. Everything within belongs to it. If there are people in the Zug-Zug's zone, then from the Zug-Zug's point of view it owns them too.

Everything is worried by the Zug-Zug. Relentless, fearless, tireless and very very smart, they can outwit human beings and take on creatures many times their size. If utterly outmatched they will still deliver harm before they die. The Zug-Zugs parting gift is often wild castration, or a femoral bleed, then death.

They speak. Very very rarely, since they don't care what you think, but they can grunt out words, and they can write, scratching letters in the dirt. And not just single tongues, they can learn many languages, simply by listening in the night, beyond the circle of the fire. Since they have no real desire to communicate, their language use is minimal, consisting mainly of the low guttural call of 'zug-zug-zug-zug-zug'. They have no relics and no crafts, they do not believe in anything they cannot sense, so no religion is found amongst them.

Like people, Zug-Zug's can think in time, planning and predicting events sometimes years ahead. They can solve complex problems, something discovered by humans as soon as they try to imprison one ("An almost impossible feat" - Z) They can identify weaknesses in armour and guarded perimeters, but also in hierarchies and cultures, and families.

Large cultures of organised human beings are one of the few things that can potentially threaten a Zug-Zug. Not one-on-one, a person is stupider, slower and weaker than a Zug-Zug, and the Zug-Zug can generally evade or outwit groups, but people alter their environment. They can burn trees, salt crops and frighten game, and this can change the Zug-Zug's zone. An uneasy truce often prevails with the Zug-Zug generally not eating people from certain communities and those communities generally not doing things the Zug-Zug would not like.

And, oddly, human cultures in a Zug-Zug's zone rarely rise above a tribal state. Those bold individuals that forge the cores of kingdoms tend to die, or disappear, with alarming regularity. Likewise, prophets, or religious leaders who might unify the local tribes into a larger mass, either never occur, or simply 'go away'. Strong workers of the Subtle Art either leave the zone rapidly, or go missing in the night.

It is a disturbing possibility that the Zug-Zug knows quite a lot more about us than we know about it.

Though most peoples living in a Zug-Zug's zone regard it as a powerful and crafty predator, some begin to suspect that their culture somehow 'belongs' to the Zug-Zug. That the Zug-Zug allows them to exist, manages their growth, sometimes protects them and sometimes thins the herd. And that it understands them, not just as a group of animals, but that it knows their culture and internal factions. They look at the regular inter-tribal wars, the dearth of peacemakers and unifiers, the disappearance of certain useful people at certain useful times, and they worry. But they do not speak their fears out loud. Those who do often do not see the dawn.

A Zug-Zug is not generally very interested in solving problems with other Zug-Zugs. To them, other Zug-Zugs are the problem. When they wish to breed, a male Zug-Zug must try to outwit a female Zug-Zug, or possibly the other way round. Since Zug-Zugs are highly intelligent, fiercely independent, solitary, covered in spines and hundreds of miles apart, the greatest threat to their population is their difficulty in mating.

Female Zug-Zugs bear a single child. A Zug-Zug kit is the safest mortal being, the only thing to ever be protected by not one, but two Zug-Zugs. Other than their ownership-of-zone this is the only protective instinct Zug-Zugs have, though it is strong.

The Zug-Zug diet is everything. They chew bones raw, eat honey, fruit, grains, insects, carrion and vultures, ("Zug-Zugs will hide inside a rotting corpse to eat the Vultures that come for it" - Z) animals of every kind, people, hair, the bark of trees and sometimes rocks. They do love honey. ("Bee stings won't penetrate the Zug-Zug's hide." - Z)

An odd twist of the Zug-Zug's other instinct, its desire to preserve its young, is the accidental protection of children. Though a lone adult facing a Zug-Zug is in terrible danger, a lost child will often be protected, sometimes against staggering odds. But the single mercy of the Zug-Zug is unpredictable and strange, no parent seeks its limit.

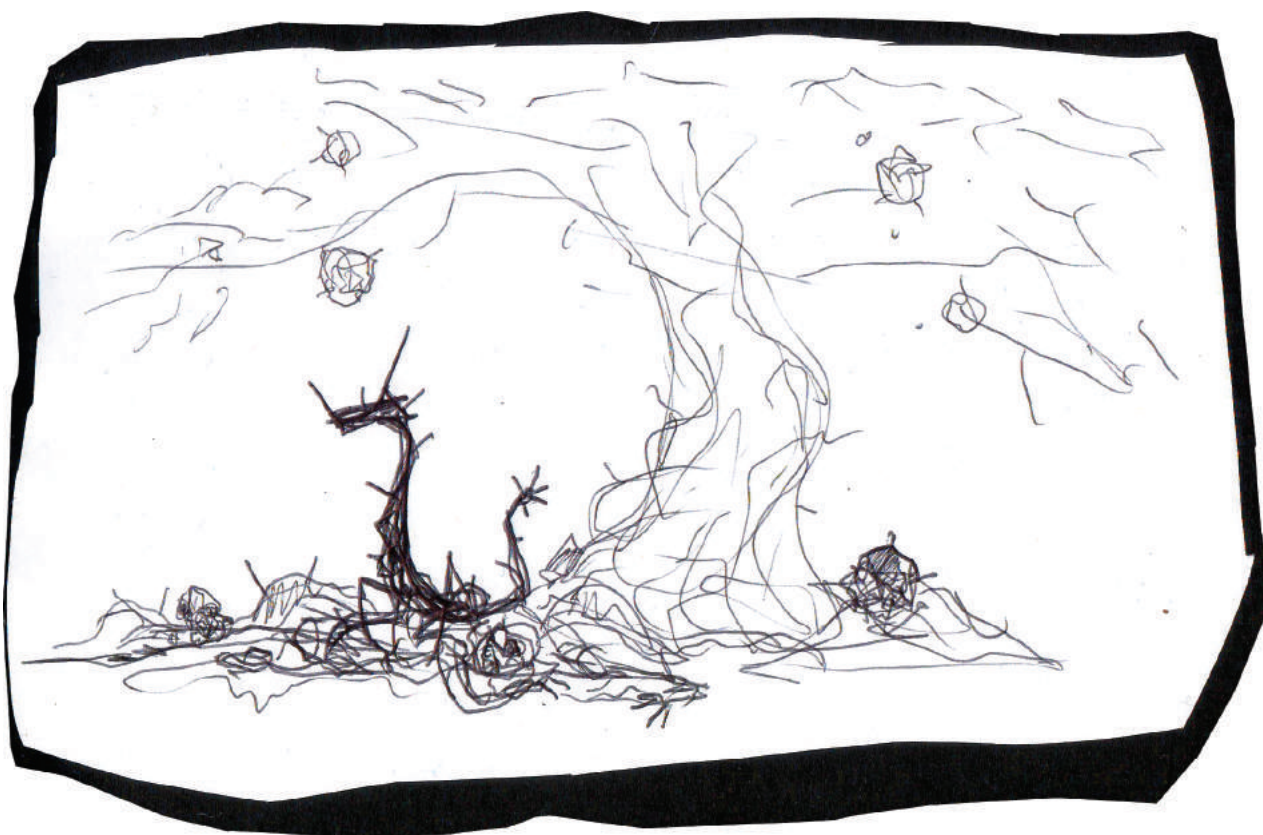
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Blatsitsu - An introduction

Excerpt from

'BLATSITSU! - A fighting style for battling impossible things.
For gentlemen, scholars and ladies travelling without chaperone.

(2nd edition with additions by P Zenithal.)

by Juglangsing Leptoblast

It has been my fate and pleasure since my very early years to be subject to adventure. I have wandered and roved the wide world, seeking always some fresh discovery or unknown thing. Danger has been my constant companion, danger in a plethora of unexpected forms, whether from the common beasts of the forest and field, from the storms and winds which wracked the sky, from the turpitude and greed of men, or from, occasionally, the vagaries and inconsistencies of my own character.

But it is not of these dangers that I wish to speak, but of a particular kind of threat, the danger of the tetramorphs, those remarkable and unusual beings known commonly to men as 'monsters'.

The division betwixt animal and monster, and even between monster and man, must perforce be both permeable and loosely drawn. Is the Sanguine Crane a monster? In most circumstances, not at all. But, if it should come upon you in the morning while you sleep, and hunger for your blood, then certainly it is.

Is the Bedlam Bird a monster? It is and must be considered so at all times, so cunning and malignant a beast it is.

However we are to arrange such definitions, it has been always my desire and joy to seek out those creatures noted for their unusual nature and even for their potential danger, and to make what account of them I could. Combat, of any kind, has never been my intention. I am a scholar, not a warrior. Nevertheless, chance or dark circumstance has many times, in many places, lead me to affray. A rough milling indeed between the stones of violent time!

It would be a poor scholar indeed who sought out such circumstances, but a poorer one still who failed to learn, and make what devisements they could for the sustaining of their life in the field of wild peril and unexpected mischance.

It is the fruit of just such experience which this volume seeks to condense and lay before you as one coherent physical and psychological system which, if followed correctly, will gift the learner with the sum product, not only of my long experience, but of my careful analysis. BLATSITSU! is not only a mere fighting system, (perhaps the most comprehensive ever devised) but a pattern of thought, an attitude and way of being.

The greatest weapon, and sweetest boon of man has always been: THE MIND. And BLATSITSU! seeks to train not only the body, but the mind, body and spirit as one. It is an intellectual as well as physical journey and the deeper the efforts made in its employ, the deeper shall be the rewards.

I am no genius. BLATSITSU!, though an original creation of my own, has deep roots in the fighting styles of many cultures renowned for their martial ability. Over my long years I have been lucky enough to study with the exemplars of several of these styles. I have learnt the Hand of the Yam from the Yam Man of the Phyrrous Plains, I have taken instruction from the silent Rapier Men, I have visited also with the Swamp-Drunk tribes of the Melanic Moors and learnt something of their 'Drunken Bog-Dance' style.

Yet there are still other cultures, not so famous for their martial abilities, who may still have much to teach us. Not all who possess knowledge are inclined to advertise the fact. I have also studied the slow-time trench-fighting style of the heralds of the dark, I have spoken with the shadows and learnt the true shadow-boxing, I have had converse with the Considerate Ones and learnt from them many secrets of war in the world beneath our own and the power of the 'discretion punch'.

From all of these sources and from many more, I have condensed the core lessons and attitudes and combined them into BLATSITSU!, a fighting style devised specifically for battling impossible and unexpected things.

The primary style of BLATSITSU! assumes its practitioner will have access to a basic duelling stick. However, as a scheme for training both mind and body, BLATSITSU! is an attitude so much as a fighting style, one based on boldness, innovation, subtlety and environmental awareness. Chapters clarify the use of BLATSITSU! when armed only with hand and foot, (the true BLATSITSU! practitioner is never truly disarmed), when tied up, when imprisoned and when asleep.

It is in the field of the unconscious that the mental and physical practice of BLATSITSU! combine to the deepest effect. You will never be in so much danger as when in a dream and the battles fought there can be of deep consequence in the waking world

This second addition of BLATSITSU! has been amended and increased with comments and recommendations from a young correspondent, one P. Zenithal, who contacted me after the original publication of the first edition with questions regarding the use of BLATSITSU! by a female practitioner.

I was at first quite surprised, I had assumed that no woman travelling with a chaperone or protector would need or require such an Art. However, after the exchange of several letters I became persuaded that it is no longer an unusual circumstance for women, young or old, to travel without male accompaniment, and in some cases into the very depths of the wilds themselves.

There is no doubt that, should they come into contact with Tetramorphs, a woman would be in as much need of BLATSITSU! as any man. These creatures (with a few exceptions) are no respecters of gender.

As BLATSITSU! encompasses a coherent learning programme for both mind and body, and since it is a mental attitude as much as a physical programme, I believe it should apply equally well to both men AND women. The subtitle has therefore been changed. BLATSITSU! now advertises itself for not only Scholars and Gentlemen, but also any Lady travelling alone. After reviewing Ms Zenithal's comments and finding them an excellent match with both the spirit and practice of BLATSITSU!, I have incorporated them into a new chapter addressing difficulties and opportunities likely to be faced by the female practitioner such as: 'what to do with your skirts in a fight', 'fighting with an umbrella', 'scissors and their uses' and 'Hair'.

I have also added some comments regarding the criticisms made of BLATSITSU! by several individuals both uninformed and unwise. BLATSITSU! does not encourage 'low level alcoholism' though unlike most conventional fighting manuals it does acknowledge the uses of alcohol both in training the awareness and in loosening the muscles and encouraging improvisation. Neither is it 'a rag-bag of techniques arranged around some made up monsters', every creature described in BLATSITSU! is quite real and the techniques described are ones I have myself tested in the field. Furthermore, BLATSITSU! is no mere list of techniques to be matched with each opponent like some petty accountancy of harm, but a system of improvisation and creation so that, no matter what strange and unpredictable threat the practitioner is faced with, they may formulate THEIR OWN response to their PARTICULAR circumstances.

BLATSITSU! demands a great deal from its practitioners, but, if you follow the instructions and processes within I guarantee that you will discover for yourself its enormous transformative power. And remember, even if you should be small, apparently weak, of no matter what gender or shape you may be, if you have a MIND and a BODY then BLATSITSU! is for YOU. I will leave you with the words of the old song.

"That ever was thrall, now is he free;
That ever was small, now grete is she"

It is true. It is BLATSITSU!



CURSELING RIDDLES

1.
"I need not speak my warning
or meet your eyes with mine
to tell my tale.
Once I was like you
until a sudden message met my throat,
I have seen the end
but cannot feel my feet."

A Severed Head

2.
"I will wait
for those who left me here
where the path divides
between heaven and earth.
I went up, but
I won't come down again.
the Crow knows me."

A Hanged Man

3.
"My makers hate me
though
I am a neat small size
and take less work to make.
They give me what they loved,
I keep it safe.
They visit all the time,
but hate coming.
I make them cry."

A Child's Grave

4.
"I have many friends,
they take me to the best places.
I love food and drink
the stronger the better.
I like clothes too sometimes,
tight is good for me,
if you want a bit of violence
I won't object to cuts,
but no bruises please
I rarely have the time."

Poison

5.
"I have a bad reputation
yet, I have freed slaves,
helped battered wives escape,
sometimes, I admit
I'll get a killer out of jail
but, I have been known
to help the mad and sick.
Kings too
more than a few I have released from jams.
I will never discriminate
and the darker things seem
the closer I will be."

Suicide

6.
You make me
but cannot escape me
I have no boundary
Time and Space obey me
But I die before dawn.

A Nightmare

7.
Once I destroyed all
I and my white brothers
Two armies ranked, we fought for life
Nothing survived us.
Then, I met a foe to hard or sharp or sweet.
Now I torture you until you cast me out.

A Broken Tooth

8.
I will take everything one day.
But no day.
Till then I wait behind closed eyes.

Darkness / Night

9.
I want one thing: for you to live.
But don't listen
Or I'll eat your life whole.

Fear

10.
You don't like me clothing you
But you will wear me in the end
And become me after that.
We will catch sunbeams
And sleep in the stillness.

Dust

11.
I am never really with you.
You might think you have found me,
But the closer you attend
The more distant I seem.
I flee between the stars.

Silence

12.
Don't worry, I always pass cleanly
Though I seem dirty.
I want to be with you!
Not this still one.
(I have to keep moving)
I have already forgotten how it all went down.
(I have no memory)
Though others might not have.

Gold from dead hands

13.
This is the greatest partnership!
I cost you nothing
I always listen
I never complain
You can make me with a knife
And fuck me all night.

A Dead Wife! (Curselings always laugh after this one.)

14.
The wild beasts know me still.
The poor never forgot.
You made a golden wall to keep me out.
And built a golden store in case I came.
I was inside the wall.
I was beneath the store.
When feasts are done I feast on you.

Famine.

15.
It wasn't us!
One gave us our command.
Our ten servants did the deed.
Of two, now one remains.
How then can we be guilty of the crime?

A murderer's hands.

NAVARCH

Ark-Eater
Prime

First
Fistulix

Grist-Things

Murder
Man

Murder
Man's
Mate

Visceral

Visceral
Gravel

Ocular

Ocular
Gap

Second
Fistulix

Third
Fistulix

etc

Bonesman

Bonesman's
Mate

Ape
Eradiator

Eradiator's
Mate

Quibbler

Regrett able
Quibbler

Mid-Ship
Souls

Souls

Centrifugal
soul

old soul

Hungry
soul

Rational
soul

NAVARCH OF Aaŧ COMMAND STRUCTURE

The Ark-Eater Prime eats Arkŧ and has the right of first consumption of any religious relic found on Aaŧ, this right supersedes even the Navarch itself, the only circumstance in which it does not exercise ultimate sovereignty.

The Ark-Eater commands the Grist-Things, specialist officers with particular duties, and the Fistulix, through the First Fistulix.

The Fistulix command the Mid-Ship Souls and they command the Basic Souls.

A direct order from superior to immediate inferior, that is, from First Fistulix to Second Fistulix, or from Ocular to Ocular Gap, is given with the Prefix 'Mister', and then the title of that post. This is done regardless of the gender, shape or form of anyone involved. In the case of the relationship between a Grist-Thing and their mate this may be shortened to the second part of the title, but the prefix of 'Mister' may not be ignored. So the Bonesman may refer to their Mate as 'Mister Mate' or the Quibbler to their Regrettable as 'Mister Regrettable', but never simply 'Mate' or 'Regrettable'.

The Navarch need only extend this privilege to the Ark-Eater Prime. "Mister Ark-Eater" or "Mister Prime" are both acceptable, but will often pay the Grist-Things the respect of using their title as well i.e. "Neatly done Mister Visceral".

Nevertheless the Navarch communicates mainly with the Ark-Eater Prime and its Murder Man, it is rare for other members of the crew to receive a direct order from it, although it has the right of Full Command of Aaŧ.

Personal names are used only in cases of unusual closeness or assumed failure. To hear your name spoken by a Superior means either that they are very happy or very upset. If this is done in public then it is almost always a reprimand.

The First Fistulix has a superior position to, though not technical command over, the Grist-Things. Any order given must be given "with civility", that is, phrased as a request and with the correct title used in full, along with prefix. i.e. "Mister Bonesman would you kindly flense me a bucket of clavicles."

This is extended even to the Grist-Things Mates, who are considered to be extensions of the Grist-Things position.

When an order 'leaps the chain', and is given directly to an inferior two or more positions down then the prefix of 'Mister' need not be used. Only the basic title, or, in the case of Basic Souls, simply 'You' or 'That'.

This can lead to complex situations if the number of Bonesmans Mates, or Eradicators Mates is massively expanded, (not an unusual occurrence in cases of Moon Ape invasion or damage to the wheel) then the First Fistulix will address a members of this sometimes huge mob of uncertain Souls 'with civility' - "Mister Mate would you kindly suppress those Apes by force", whilst addressing the Third Fistulix, someone who would usually outrank by far a Basic Soul, with near contempt: "Damnn you Fistulix, slaver those groins!"

Likewise, a Grist-Thing formally outranks any Fistulix other than First, but any orders must be phrased 'with civility' in the same manner.

(There can be brutal arguments between the Grist-Things mates and mid-ranking Fistulix over precedence and authority. Though technically the

Grist-Things Mate does have the advantage so long as their orders are phrased correctly. Even the Regrettable Quibbler may order a Fistulix, though they would be unwise to try.)

Basic Souls are made up of three ranks. The first and lowest is the 'Rational Soul', so named because they are used as rations by the rest of the crew. This encompasses 90% of the population of Aaŧ in most circumstances.

Above them are the 'Hungry Souls', these are formerly Rational Souls who have feasted upon their own kind. This marks them out as potential recruits into the command structure of Aaŧ.

Above the Rational Souls are Old Souls. This includes any individual who has sailed with the Navarch on multiple journeys, yet has not been promoted. An unusual position indeed. While Hungry Souls and Rational Souls are made up of the basic population of Aaŧ, the Old Soul can be almost any kind of Soul at all. They are extremely evil.

Most Old Souls hunger for promotion, either to Mid-Ship Souls or A Grist-Things Mate. If they fail to be promoted over several trips they are commonly referred to as 'an Old Old Soul'. There are some very Old Old Souls who are actually happy in their position and have sailed with Aaŧ longer than some members of the crew, they are a source of strange tales and disturbing wisdom.

There exist also Centrifugal Souls. They occupy an unusual position, not only physically, but also within the command structure of Aaŧ. They consist of any individual who has found their way to the weightless centre of Aaŧ and hangs there suspended yet alive. By the custom of Aaŧ, these creatures exist outside the hierarchy, meaning they can neither command, nor be commanded. Therefore they cannot be Rational Souls, therefore they cannot be eaten.

No member of the crew of Aaŧ may forcibly remove any Centrifugal Soul from their strange position, they may only request, 'with all due respect and observance of form' that they come down. Though once they do come down they can then be considered Rational Souls and eaten.

Most Centrifugal Souls simply starve to death.

Though all Grist-Things technically occupy the same rank, in reality there is an informal order of precedence.

The Murder Man is usually ranked first amongst them. In cases of the death or demotion of the Ark-Eater Prime, they are usually replaced by either the First Fistulix or the Murder Man. For this reason there is a constant rivalry between them.

The Murder Man is in primary charge of the Navarch's supply of 'rations', which brings them into direct contact with the Navarch itself. Often they become extremely skilled at Navigation although, obviously, nowhere near as effective as the Navarch. They will usually hide these skills well, if they are seen to be too able or to know too much, they may be rationalised, yet, if Aaŧ is in danger and the Navarch requests assistance, to make anything less than a total effort would have disastrous implications. The position is a complex one.

The Bonesman's chief responsibility is providing bones for the wheel, a vital task. Since the Navarch may request almost any kind of bone and in any numbers, this is a difficult position to fill and is one of the most common vehicles of promotion in Aaŧ. If the Navarch orders 'one hundred skulls for the wheel', the Bonesman must hurry and recruit mates from the ships souls to complete the order.

Skill in retrieving bones can provide ready advancement into the rank of Bonesman's Mate, especially smaller and more unusual bones that are

difficult to retrieve by brute force. A salamander's cochlear bone, for instance.

The **Visceral** is in charge of feeding the crew. An uninteresting position unless **Aaŧ** should start to run low on souls, in which case the **Visceral** has charge of deciding which members of the crew are eaten and in which order. A rank which grows more powerful the longer the journey goes on.

The **Ape Eradicator** is in charge of defending **Aaŧ** from infestations and 'minor' attacks from the hull. Most commonly infestations of Moon-Apes who climb in through the stern and steal souls. Though they can also be employed against any other threat which rides the hull of **Aaŧ**.

Like the **Bonesman** the **Ape-Eradicator** may recruit as many **Mates** as are required to fulfil their duties, sometimes a very large number indeed, depending on the number of Apes. This makes the position another excellent vehicle for promotion, one of the few which does not necessarily require consumption of Souls.

The **Ape Eradicator** and its **Mates** are one of the few ranks expected to go outside onto the hull of **Aaŧ**, leading to dangerous levels of total insanity. "As mad as the **Eradicators Mate**" is a common phrase.

The worst circumstance any **Ape Eradicator** can conceive is if Apes should enter **Aaŧ** from the prow, in full view of the **Navarch**.

The **Navarch** is quite capable of defending itself, but the presence of Apes at the prow and not just the stern indicates a very large infestation indeed, one that should never have been allowed to grow as large as it has. In this case the **Ape-Eradicator** is almost always demoted or 'Rationalised'.

(Defending **Aaŧ** from interdiction is the responsibility of the crew and 'all souls that can be compelled'.)

The **Ocular** has charge of maintaining awareness of the inside of **Aaŧ**, usually reporting directly to the **Ark-Eater Prime**. The **Ocular Gap** is often projected or launched into the centre of **Aaŧ** in order to get a better view. Though tied to a long rope or some other device by which they may be retrieved, this does technically make them a **Centrifugal Soul**, at least while they retain their position. For this reason, they may refuse to come down if they wish, though the consequences can be dire.

The **Quibbler** queries orders, plans and processes and keeps a ships long, as well as a record of everything inside **Aaŧ** that is not souls. It is not known for whom the **Quibbler** keeps its records, it's certainly not the **Navarch**, although the **Navarch** does acknowledge the quibblers rank and role and if a **Quibbler** is killed the **Navarch** itself will interrupt the chain of command to appoint a new one in a private talk.

The **Quibbler's** position also involves keeping track of threats not only from inside or outside **Aaŧ**, but from dangerous treasours in the crew itself. Most murders and assassinations are considered a reasonable and normal part of the process of commanding **Aaŧ**, unless they occur with too great a frequency, but anything that could threaten the position of the **Navarch** (unthinkable) or endanger the journey itself might be considered a 'meaningful treason' and lead to a drum-head trial before the **Navarch** itself at which the **Quibbler** will give evidence and act as prosecution.

The **Quibblers** job also involves it keeping track of what would commonly be considered 'treasures' recovered from **Aaŧ**. These are of little interest to the Crew, but often form the basis of plots by **Rational Souls** to take **Aaŧ** by force.

The **Regrettable Quibblers** or '**Regretables**' act as agents for the **Quibbler**. This is another excellent vehicle for promotion inside **Aaŧ**, as, loathed as much as the **Quibbler** themselves, but lacking the direct protection of their rank they often die in 'accidents' or 'disappear'.



Report on the Palace of

Iksladzord

SC: [REDACTED] valuable [REDACTED]
dangerous [REDACTED] wrath of Iksladzord
[REDACTED] bug ?!

SUBJECT: Well now its true you never asked me our-
right directly just ta 'steal' anything, but you know
folks usually don't. What Ah'm sayin' buddy is that
the assumption of theft kinda goes along with the
whole 'breakin-an-enterin' situation. If you wanted
me to break into this creatures abode and *not* steal
anything then well hell, you shoulda told me that.

SC: [REDACTED] !?!

SUBJECT: Like "Get in there, take a look around AND
DON'T TAKE NOTHING [REDACTED] YOU DUMBASS", cause any
other way you say it kind sounds like "find this
place, get in there and take a look around".

SC: [REDACTED] context [REDACTED] !

SUBJECT: The context is *implied* you horses ass! You
hired a thief to not steal!

SC: [REDACTED] revoking [REDACTED] fee [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] legal action [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] deniability [REDACTED]
wiped from the record and disavowed.

SUBJECT: Hell son you do get *frantic* don't you?

SC: I am [REDACTED]
of [REDACTED] You will not [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] "son"!

SUBJECT: Alright buddy, sorry "[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]". You won't mind if ah actually
disclose that information you sent me to *acquire*?

SC: [REDACTED]

SUBJECT: No. Well it's done now so ah may as well
tell you what ah saw.
It was pretty much right where you put it on the map,
we went up that golden river for a long while, curvin
off into the streams that fed the streams that fed
the streams. Then we see the gates. Big stone river
gates came up just before the river got too small for
a boat to manage. They was somewhat encrusted with
the discards of Time but the lock behind em worked
well enough.
Once we got through the lock was a long canal. Hell
of a thing. Stone banks, straight like an arrow,
stagnant quiet and overgrown. We poled up that pond
for a long while with those queer trees with the red
leaves growin closer.

SC: [REDACTED] Rhodopsin ?

SUBJECT: Yeah ,those leaves had fallen and made the
canal kind of still red road. Ah reckon it was Autumn
for those trees regardless of what season it was for
everythin else.
Ah kept an lookout for Owls and singin' women like
you said, and we battened down and kept still and
under cover in the night. Guess we got lucky. Took us
a day or two and then I see it risin' up over the
trees.

SC: [REDACTED]

SUBJECT: Well it's difficult to say exactly, looked kinda
like one of those kids toys you get to teach em shapes,
but fitted together. Like a puzzle you was just in the
middle of solvin', but it made a pleasin' form so you
just kinda left it like that. It was wood, mainly ah
think but ah can't be sure. There were stone foundations
ahm certain and stone within. On top of that there was
kinda like a suspension-bridge getup included with wires
or somethin' comin out like bones in a birds wing.

SC: [REDACTED] ?

SUBJECT: Yeah the whole thing looked kinds ay-
symmetrical. Like it was fallin or foldin into or
outa itself. It looked like some parts we sorta
hangin or balanced against other parts with these
fine fine wires. Looked kinda beautiful actually.
Whole thing did.

SC: [REDACTED] vulnerability [REDACTED] ?

SUBJECT: No ah had the same idea but ah don't reckon
you could. When ah got up close a saw that they were
cables, woven with metal like it was wool. Very
strong indeed. You would need a lot of force to break
one.

Well we could see it and we thought we were close so
we kept goin'. Turned out we weren't that close at
all. Place was just so fuckin huge you could see it
from three miles off. Bigger than any castle tower I
ever saw. No idea how it stayed up.
At the end of the canal was stone docks. Strange and
well made, and beyond them was the Palace.

SC: [REDACTED] ?

SUBJECT: Old too, but clean, like your grandma's
house. It was dammm quiet there and somethin kept the
trees from growin too close. You had a good bowshot
an-then-some from the walls to any cover. And the
ground was flagged and almost-flat. The floor was
waved and smooth like the surface of a swellin' sea.
Real odd. I guess that's how they like it though.
Well it was getting pretty late. Ah didn't want to
stay right outside the place and we reckoned last
night we had heard the cry of Owls, so ah decided to
just get on in there, get the job done, see what was
what.

SC: [REDACTED] surface [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] outer [REDACTED] ?

SUBJECT: looked kinda like a loose shell of stone.
Like a tortoise shell you know but with all the bits
of the shell separated and hangin in some kinda frame
of wood and wire. Those shell parts were about six
feet wide ah think, larger the further up you got.
The shell pieces moved a little, they weren't quite
securely fit, not like a brick or a flagstone. Turned
out later they could move around quite a bit. Ah
looked behind one and all ah could see was a great
complexity of suspension. Every time the wind changed
the shells moved a little and ah don't think no rain
or snow could have got in there, not because it was
solid but because it kinda *responded*. It was a little
like a skin and a little like feathers in the way it
moved and a lot like a wall.

SC: [REDACTED] Art?

SUBJECT: No ah don't think it was magic. You could
kinda see that everythin got attached to everythin
else at some point and it never seemed to put out
more than got put in, if you get my meaning, which is
the clearest sign of magic to me.
That was the basics of it. The bigger frame was made
of wood and metal and light strong stone, all carved
and cut very exactly and arranged with each other
with great ease and fluid thought. Ah never saw any
person or thing mix together materials so complexly
and in such diffuse ways. it wasn't like it was
impossible, ah reckon people could do it, but it
wouldn't make sense to them to do so as you'd need to
plan every single tiny flourish, right down to the
carvings and the tiny joints, and then snap it all
together in sequence and if any single thing went
wrong then maybe the whole thing would be screwed, so
I don't see how we would ever make a thing that way.
There wasn't much goin' on there with colour. Almost
everything was its natural shade, just polished and
worked right down to the fine details. You touched it
and it was smooth. No splinters, no cracks.

SC: [REDACTED] ?

SUBJECT: Well its always been mah principle that if
you're breakin into a place you do best to start at
the top and work your way down. So that's what ah
did. I myself am just about the best climber that I
have ever seen and it took me agood half an hour to

I am like no other thing,
A gem not famed for brightness.
Dead, but only listen and I live.
Voiceless, I speak.
Thoughtless, I lie.
Deeper than dark water,
Sharper than a swift sword,
Stranger than a drugged dream,
I serve in ordered ranks that never change.
Till night,
When a gallery of shadows paints your thoughts,
with more colours than a careless artists hand.
Lose me or be lost in me.
I am a place you may not go,
Once there I will not let you leave.
Though made of broken things I am yet whole.
And guard one hundred murders.
Let's kill your friends for fun.



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